

25th ANNIVERSARY YEAR

interzone

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METAL DRAGON YEAR

CHRIS ROBERSON



THE LOST XUYAN BRIDE

ALLETTE DE BODARD



THE BEST OF YOUR LIFE

JASON STODDARD



MOLLY & THE RED HAT

BENJAMIN ROSENBAUM



ODIN'S SPEAR

STEVE BEIN



THE MEN IN THE ATTIC

JOHN PHILLIP OLSEN



GARY GIBSON

INTERVIEWED



ORIGINAL ART

KENN BROWN

PAUL DRUMMOND

WARWICK FRASER-COOMBE



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DAVID LANGFORD

WORLDCON REPORT

BOOKS & FILMS



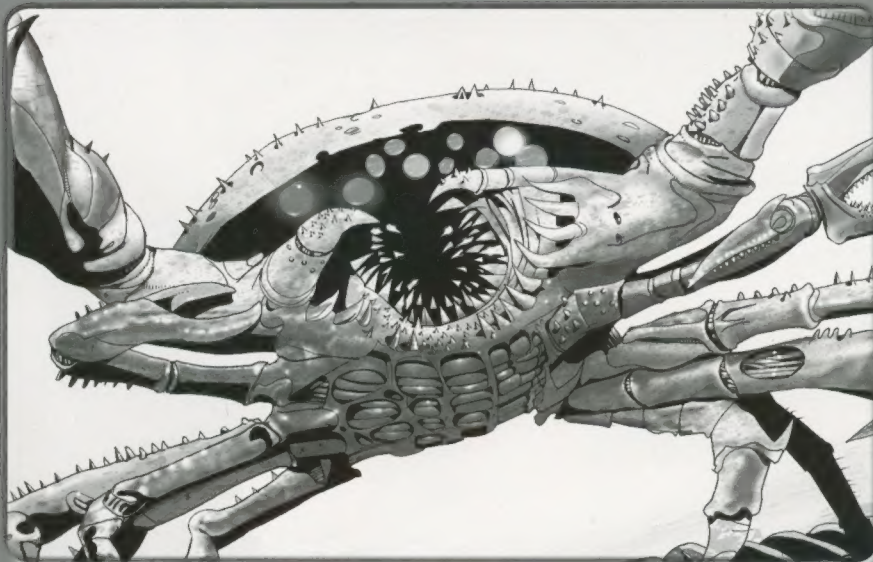
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COMING SOON...

Crystal Nights Greg Egan

illustrated by Warwick Fraser-Coombe



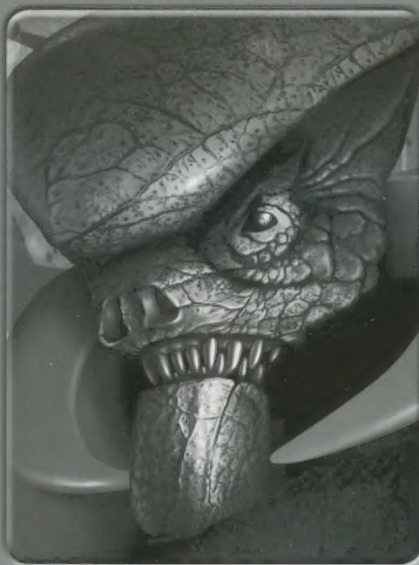
Pseudo Tokyo Jennifer Linnaea

illustrated by Darren Winter



Concession Girl Suzanne Palmer

illustrated by Darren Winter



plus stories by

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"What's surprising is how often
sf has been seen as a predictor of
a kind of super-rationalist utopia
where everyone abandons religion
and superstition in favour of some
vaguely imagined society free of
the pettier human drives"

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MORE OF THE LATEST
BOOKS REVIEWED



AZTECS ON MARS

Chris Roberson sent us a story set in his Celestial Empire called 'Metal Dragon Year'. A little later, Aliette de Bodard sent us 'The Lost Xuyan Bride'. It struck us immediately how alike the backgrounds of these stories were: a world where China and the Aztecs are the dominant powers, and where the Spanish either didn't discover America or were defeated by the Aztecs. Both stories are also set in the late 20th/early 21st centuries where the competition between those *other* Eastern and Western powers is at least as intense as it was in our Cold War era.

So, instead of rejecting the second story (which we liked too much to bounce anyway!) or hiding the similarity by publishing the stories separately, we thought it'd be more interesting to run them both in the same issue, and show that two writers living in different continents can, independently, come up with the same idea but then work it out in a completely different way.

We asked the authors to tell us briefly how they imagined and then developed their alternate worlds:

Chris: The Celestial Empire got its start in a hotel bar, as all good things do. I was invited by Lou Anders to contribute to his anthology *Live Without a Net*, in which tropes of cyberpunk were replaced by something else. I chose the computer, and banged together a story that mashed up John Henry and the Steam Engine with an anecdote from the biography of Richard Feynman, in a world colored by Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Last Emperor*. The next year in another hotel bar Lou asked me if I'd do a follow up. Since in the first story the Chinese emperor is establishing a space program, Lou asked me what happened next, and without thinking I answered that the Chinese went to Mars and found that the Aztecs were there waiting for them. Of course, having done no actual research for the first story beyond rewatching Bertolucci's film, I now had to work out the mechanics of the world, how the Chinese might have risen to power, and just what the Aztecs were doing on Mars. The result has been a dozen or more short stories and a handful of novels that will be coming out in the course of the next few years, which together comprise the sequence I call the Celestial Empire. Any readers interested in tracking down the others stories can find a full list of them at chrisroberson.net.

Aliette: I've always been fascinated by China – and in particular by the country's spectacular decline into isolationism in the 15th Century. What if this hadn't happened – what if China had continued to reach outwards, and discovered America first? One other thing I found interesting is how incredibly lucky the Spanish were in conquering Mexico: what if, for instance, the Aztecs hadn't welcomed the conquistadores as gods? The two ideas somehow merged, and I started building a universe in which the first foreigners to reach the Aztecs would be Chinese colonists; and the Chinese and the Aztecs would ally to defeat the Spanish. My boyfriend then pointed out that my changes occurred on the West Coast and in Mexico: their outcome wouldn't immediately affect the English colonisation of the East Coast. Thus, I arrived at the world depicted in 'The Lost Xuyan Bride', where three powers share the current US territory. First, to the west of the Rocky Mountains, Xuya, the former Chinese colony; then the Aztec Empire in the south; and finally, the much-diminished United States in the east. I'm currently working on other stories set in this universe. For more information about the rest of my work, visit aliettedebodard.com.

We now leave it up to you to find how strangely similar yet still essentially distinct these stories are. We hope you enjoy the rest of this issue as well – Nick Lowe (Mutant Popcorn), by the way, is taking a well-earned break. Please visit our online forum at ttapress.com/forum to air your views, and please also start thinking about your favourite stories of the year. We'll list them all next issue and invite you to participate in the annual Readers' Poll.

Meanwhile, we think you'll be interested to learn that *The Fix* is now online, live and entirely free at thefix-online.com, headed up by managing editor Eugie Foster. *The Fix* is entirely dedicated to the critical coverage of short speculative fiction and reviews all the publications where it can be found, and supplements this with a wide range of features and interviews. It's updated constantly so visit often, bookmark, subscribe to the feed...



Ultraman confronts the Hugo rocket while Mount Fuji cowers in the background (photo © Chris O'Shea)

Nippon 2007 was the first World SF Convention held in Japan. Its Hugo ceremony was dominated by the superhero Ultraman – an iconic figure of Japanese TV for 40 years – who opened the event by defeating various rubber-clad monsters and is commemorated in the Hugo trophy itself. And the winners are...

Novel: Vernor Vinge, *Rainbows End*.

Novella: Robert Reed, 'A Billion Eves' (*Asimov's*). **Novelette:** Ian McDonald, 'The Djinn's Wife' (*Asimov's*). **Short:** Tim Pratt, 'Impossible Dreams' (*Asimov's*). **Related**

Book: Julie Phillips, *James Tiptree, Jr.: The Double Life of Alice B. Sheldon*. **Dramatic (Long):** *Pan's Labyrinth*. **Dramatic (Short):** *Doctor Who*, 'The Girl in the Fireplace'. **Pro Editor (Long):** Patrick Nielsen Hayden.

Pro Editor (Short): Gordon Van Gelder.

Pro Artist: Donato Giancola. **Semiprozine:** *Locus*. **Fanzine:** *Science-Fiction Five-Yearly*.

Fan Writer: David Langford (smirks modestly). **Fan Artist:** Frank Wu. **Campbell Award for new author:** Naomi Novik.

In the 2009 Worldcon site selection Montréal defeated Kansas City by a clear majority of 507 votes to 341.

Doris Lessing, both a 'literary' author and an unashamed writer of sf who was a guest of honour at the 1987 UK Worldcon, won the 2007 Nobel Prize for Literature. Let this be a lesson to...

Jeanette Winterson insists that her new novel isn't sf but 'more than speculative': 'I'm not a Luddite; I'm fascinated by technology. There's not a single thing in *The Stone Gods* that's not plausible; it's not flights of fantasy or science fiction, but completely within our reach.' (*Metro*, September) In this book's far future, genetic fixing has eliminated ageing, an advanced AI robot can be one's soulmate, and mankind is starting anew on a fresh 'Planet Blue'. But apart from *that*, what has sf ever done for us? Though liking the book, Ursula K. Le Guin is miffed – 'It's odd to find characters in a science-fiction novel repeatedly announcing that they hate science fiction' – and deplores 'the curious ingratitude of authors who exploit a common fund of imagery while pretending to have nothing to do with the fellow-authors who created it and left it open to all who want to use it. A little return generosity would hardly come amiss.' (*Guardian*, September)

Drop A House On Her From Orbit. It's The Only Way... Todd McFarlane on his production plans for a new Oz film: 'My pitch was "How do we get people who went to *Lord of the Rings* to embrace this?" I want to create [an interpretation] that has a 2007 wow factor. You've still got Dorothy trapped in an odd place, but she's much closer to the Ripley from *Alien* than a helpless singing girl.' (*Variety*)

Howard Jacobson runs true to form in a recent interview. Anna Metcalfe: 'What makes you cross to read?' Jacobson: 'Science fiction and fantasy; or anything aimed at a child's mind. I don't think children's literature should exist.' (*Financial Times*, September)

MORE AWARDS

British Fantasy Award, novel: Tim Lebbon, *Dusk*.

James Tait Black, for fiction: Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*.

Prometheus, libertarian: Charles Stross, *Glasshouse*; also a special award to *V for Vendetta* (the film).

World Fantasy, life achievement: Betty Ballantine and Diana Wynne Jones.

Ridley Scott told *Wired* that his best-known sf film owes little to Philip K.

Dick: '*Blade Runner* involved full-bore imagination. Deckard's universe had to be expanded into credibility. That's probably the hardest thing I've done, because there was nothing to borrow from.' [...] *Wired*: 'Is it true that you didn't read *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, the book on which *Blade Runner* was based, before making the movie?' Scott: 'I honestly couldn't get into it. It's so dense...'

William Gibson invented Latin, or so the *Guardian* implies: 'The purported inventor of the terms "cyberspace" and "matrix"...'

Court Circular. 'Like a hand emerging from a freshly dug grave, enmity has arisen in the once thought settled Harlan Ellison/Fantagraphics lawsuit...' (*Publishers Weekly*). Perhaps in some alternate universe, Harlan Ellison decided that although he strongly disliked the tone of Gary Groth's rebuttal of certain Ellison allegations, he was nevertheless required by the terms of the settlement he'd signed to display this on his website for 30 days – and, being a man of his word, he did so and emerged from this affair with the maximum possible dignity. But in our timeline, the great man balked...

THOG'S MASTERCLASS

Dept of Atmospheric Physics. 'The energy field vanished – as quickly as it came – replaced by a whoosh as a vacuum of air escaped from beneath the two sections, now divided. The air vaporised in the colder temperatures, creating wisps of steam that curled towards the sky before dissipating in the atmosphere.' (Walt Becker, *Link*, 1998) **Eyeballs in the Sky Special**. 'She watched as his eyes bounced around in his head, in perfect unison with the butt of the little courtesan in front of them.' (*Ibid*) 'Langdon's eyes were transfixed on the pyramids...' (Dan Brown, *Angels & Demons*, 2000) 'His eyes touched his body.' '...his eyes picked it [a hover-sled] out of the red sand and examined it closely.' (both Gardner F. Fox, *Escape Across the Cosmos*, 1964) 'The green seethe of his gaze resembled weeping seas.' '...the dangerous and fuming green of his eyes blazed vividly, as incandescent and unclean as small emerald suns tainted by despair.' (both Stephen R. Donaldson, *Fatal Revenant*, 2007)

R.I.P.

Robert Bussard (1928–2007), US physicist whose theoretical starship drive the Bussard Ramjet featured in sf by Poul Anderson, Larry Niven and others, died on 6 October.

Clive Exton (1930–2007), UK scriptwriter who adapted sf for *Out of This World* ('The Cold Equations') and *Out of the Unknown*, and scripted an episode of *Doomwatch*, died on 16 August; he was 77.

Leslie Flood (1921–2007), UK bookseller and literary agent who co-founded the International Fantasy Award, reviewed for *New Worlds*, and continued the E.J. Carnell agency after John Carnell's death in 1972, died on 1 August; he was 85. Flood helped shape the Gollancz sf list as its chief reader through the later 1960s; on retirement in 1986 he received a special British Fantasy Award.

Joe L. Hensley (1926–2007), US lawyer, judge and sf/crime author who was active in fandom from the 1930s, died on 27 August. He was 81. His first published sf was in *Planet Stories*, 1953; his sf novel was *The Black Roads* (1976).

Madeleine L'Engle (1918–2007), much-loved US author of the Newbery Medal winner *A Wrinkle in Time* (1962) and other admired fiction for children, died on 6 September. She was 88.

James Rigney Jr (1948–2007), US writer who as Robert Jordan published the lengthy, best-selling 'Wheel of Time' fantasy sequence – beginning in 1990 with *The Eye of the World* and still unfinished – died on 16 September aged 58. In 2006 he had been diagnosed with the rare blood disease amyloidosis. There were many tributes from the sf world and outside.

DAVID LANGFORD

A Hugo award in the shape of the Ultraman TV character; men in rubber monster suits slugging it out on stage; nominees accepting their awards in full traditional kimono...this was the Nippon 2007 Worldcon, Pacifico Hotel, Yokohama, Japan. The first convention of the World Science Fiction Society ever to be held in Asia was the scene of a mass invasion of writers, artists and fans, all ready to be educated, entertained and enchanted by the home of Godzilla and Murakami.

As editor and anthologist Ellen Datlow said at the time: "We arrived on August 16th – the hottest day on record, as it turned out, and it was unbearable! But I think it's wonderful – the Japanese fans are trying their hardest to make everyone feel comfortable. I'm having a great time. We went to Kyoto, Gokoyama, took in some Noh dance and the all-female Takarazuka dance revues. I'm really impressed by what I've seen so far."

Jon Courtenay Grimwood, whose new novel *The End of the World Blues* is set partly in a near-future Tokyo, has always been impressed at how guests are treated in this country. "One of the things about Japan is that they cut us the most phenomenal amount of slack. We [foreign visitors] do things that are deeply insulting almost five hundred times a day, and we don't even know we've done it...so rather than be mortally offended by our inability to eat, drink, walk and talk the Japanese just say, 'OK, they do it differently', and they cut us slack."

Novelist and screenwriter Paul Cornell has had a long-standing interest in anime, and admitted the Worldcon and Japan in general was a powerful experience for him. "At the opening ceremony the Fan Guest of Honour, Takumi Shibano, was almost in tears when he said this was the happiest day of his life...it's all very emotional."

During the convention's five days there were a few minor glitches, such as incompatibility between local and foreign software and hardware, but in general the sheer number of panels and the precision with which they were run impressed all comers. Among some of the home-produced attractions were bilingual stage adaptations of Stanislaw Lem's *Solaris*, demonstrations of fun things to do with liquid nitrogen and Tesla coils, the Comic



The Yokohama Landmark Tower ferris wheel, courtesy of John Paul Catton

Market clueing people up on what's new in manga today, and the Japanese version of the Hugos – the Seiun Awards. The pick of this year's Seiun Awards: Sakyo Komatsu and Koshu Tani for *Japan Sinks Part Two* (Japanese Long Fiction), and Phillip Reeve for *Mortal Engines* (Translated Long Fiction).

Some of the biggest pulls of the Worldcon, however, are household names for *Interzone* readers. Most panels during the weekend had to turn up their microphones to fight against the howls of laughter coming out of any room containing George Takei, as he spun yet more anecdotes about

life on and off the *Enterprise*. David Brin, Charles Stross, Robert Charles Wilson, Pat Cadigan and Paul Cornell packed out some of the most highly anticipated readings and discussions, and the publishing houses were strongly represented by Del Rey, Tor, Baen and Pyr unveiling their forthcoming titles. One thing agreed on by all writers and publishers was that manga and anime are now firmly established as global art forms. As put by Betsy Mitchell, Vice President and Editor-in-Chief at Del Rey, "Del Rey's manga program started in 2004 with four series licensed through the Japanese publishers, Kodansha, and all

NIPPON 2007 REPORT JOHN PAUL CATTON



Fighting Ultramen, both courtesy of Ellen Datlow



Masquerade (Best in Class), courtesy of Jack Krolak

four took off incredibly well. In the first year we had a million books in print, so we were just ecstatic! Since manga has become such a huge phenomenon in the States and since so much of it appeals to teenage girls, there is a new market now for original English language comics for the female market. Some of these lines will be popular, others won't, but I think [the comic book industry] is never going to go back to the way it was before. It's never going to be just a guys-only superhero playground again."

The fans attending Nippon 2007 came from not just the USA and Japan but also as far afield as the UK, Australia, Sweden and Russia, and the biggest draws were naturally enough the guests of honour. Artists Michael Whelan and Yoshitaka Amano were the stars of the art shows, but there was a wealth of fresh talent on display. David Brin dominated panels with his flowery off-the-cuff quips, and surprised just about everyone with an origami interpretation of the Uplift series (you had to be there). The Japanese guest of honour was Sakyo Komatsu, known generally as the Godfather of Japanese SF, his most famous work being the apocalyptic near-future novel *Nihon Chimbotsu* (*Japan Sinks*). The '70s film adaptation was remade in 2006 by Tokusatsu studios with an all-star Japanese cast and Roland Emmerich-style SFX, but

predictably glossed over the social themes and issues raised in the original novel.

For those interested, it might be worth hunting down a copy of the Komatsu-approved 2006 spoof movie *Nihon Igai Zembu Chimbotsu* (*Everywhere Except Japan Sinks*), a parody in which most countries in the world are destroyed, and an untouched but uptight Japan has to deal with massive waves of foreign refugees. Now there's dystopia for you! The frail and dignified Komatsu, now seventy-six, had several short stories interpreted in the Saturday afternoon reading by bilingual Rakugo storyteller Sayoko Shirotani.

Which leaves us with the Hugo Awards themselves. George Takei hosted the evening with a meticulously scripted performance, and the biggest awards went to Vernor Vinge (Novel – *Rainbows End*), Robert Reed (Novella – 'A Billion Eves'), Ian McDonald (Novelette – 'The Djinn's Wife'), Tim Pratt (Short Story – 'Impossible Dreams'), *Pan's Labyrinth* (Dramatic Presentation – Long Form) and Doctor Who's *Girl in the Fireplace* (Dramatic Presentation – Short Form). Naomi Novik, who won the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer for her novels in the highly acclaimed *Temeraire* series, came on stage to accept the prize in full kimono. "It took two people forty-five minutes to

dress me in it," she said afterwards. "It was a fantastic experience, but it's not designed for a Western chair!"

For this aging Brit reviewer, it was heart-warming to see Doctor Who win the Dramatic Presentation Short Form Award for the second year running. Writer Steven Moffat was seen afterwards ecstatically gate-crashing every party in the Hotel, along with Paul Cornell, who was celebrating not only being tipped to win next year's Hugo for *Human Nature/Family of Blood*, but also taking over the writing of the ongoing series *Excalibur* from Marvel Comics.

Now it would be nice to end with a round up of new, innovative SF writers, but one thing that all the guests agreed on was that a lack of translators means new names are slow to appear in English. As author Pat Cadigan says, "The problem is – like everywhere, really – there is a real dearth of translators. They get ours, but we only get a fraction of that back, because translating is as creative a process as the actual writing – you have to be pretty good to convey the spirit of the story as well as the translated words, and that is a very creative, and intellectual thing to do."

One name trying to rectify that situation is the top-notch Kurodahan Press, making themselves known to Worldcon attendees through the stall in the dealers' room. Kurodahan have released *Speculative Japan*, an anthology covering three decades of innovative science fiction from writers mainly unknown to Western readers, along with a number of essays. Watch out for an in-depth feature on Kurodahan Press in a forthcoming issue of *Black Static*. Meanwhile, their website is www.kurodahan.com. And so, what memories do we take away from our whistle-stop tour of Japan and all its marvels of science fiction and science fact?

"The subways."

"The vending machines."

"The cosplay."

"The politeness."

"The ferris wheels."

"The computerized toilets," says Jay Lake, author of *Mainspring*. "This is the first time I've ever seen a toilet with a shock and fire hazard warning on it." **John Paul Catton**

JP is a British freelance writer based in West Tokyo. He writes a regular column about the dark side of Japanese culture and media for our sister magazine *Black Static*.

Yusuf Ounaminou cast his gaze over the figures chalked on the slate before him for the hundredth time, looking for something that simply wasn't there. He wanted to weed out any final flaws in their calculations but, so far, had found none. All around him the Fujian shipyard bustled with activity, distant hammering rising about the low rumble of voices from all corners, the air laced with the ozone scent of electricity.

"Everything is going well, Foreman Ounaminou," said Hsiao Jun-long, standing patiently at his side. "We are less than a day behind schedule and, considering the strain under which we labor, I have to consider that a resounding success."

Yusuf smiled and glanced over at the man beside him. A Han, he was overfed, running to corpulent, with thinning hair and a lopsided smile that revealed crooked, tobacco-stained teeth, but Hsiao possessed one of the finest technical minds Yusuf had ever encountered. Yusuf counted himself lucky to have the man as one of his chief subordinates, and could think of no one better qualified to oversee the final preflight checks for the Tiankong One launch.

"My only concern," Hsiao went on, "is the speed of the rocket at launch versus its thrust. In all the simulations we have gotten back from the Imperial House of Calculation, the rocket takes a longer time to pick up initial speed than a rocket-propelled aircraft, due to its larger mass."

"Yes," Yusuf said, standing straight and rubbing the bridge of his nose, wearily, "but it doesn't matter how fast the rocket is when it starts the journey, just that it reaches escape velocity at the appropriate point. The Arab horse speeds fast, but short, while the camel plods slowly, but it goes by day and night. Constant acceleration is the key, but a quick burst of speed at launch."

Hsiao nodded, and looked at the figures chalked on the slate. "Fair enough. But still, I wonder whether the gains of having less mass in the later stages, by producing more acceleration in the early stages, might not make the additional expenditure of propellant at launch worth the initial cost."

"You revisit old ground, Hsiao," Yusuf smiled, and crossed his arms over his chest. "There was an alternative design I originally considered, when we first worked on the Huixing project. I don't believe I ever showed it to you, did I? It would have meant for a much more massive first stage, to punch the rocket into escape velocity almost with the initial thrust, before the first stage even fell away and the second stage rockets fired. But the expenditure of fuel necessary in such an approach made for an inefficient design, even considering the mass savings in the latter stages."

Hsiao shrugged. It was all academic at this point, anyway. They had so few days left until launch, that any but the most minor of alterations to the rocket design were out of the question.

Over the crackling loudspeakers came an ululating sound, the voice of the muezzin calling the faithful to prayer from atop the shipyard mosque, for the noon *zuhr* observances.

"Well, back to work," Hsiao said with a smile, giving a small wave. "I'll update you on the final fuel tests when you get back."

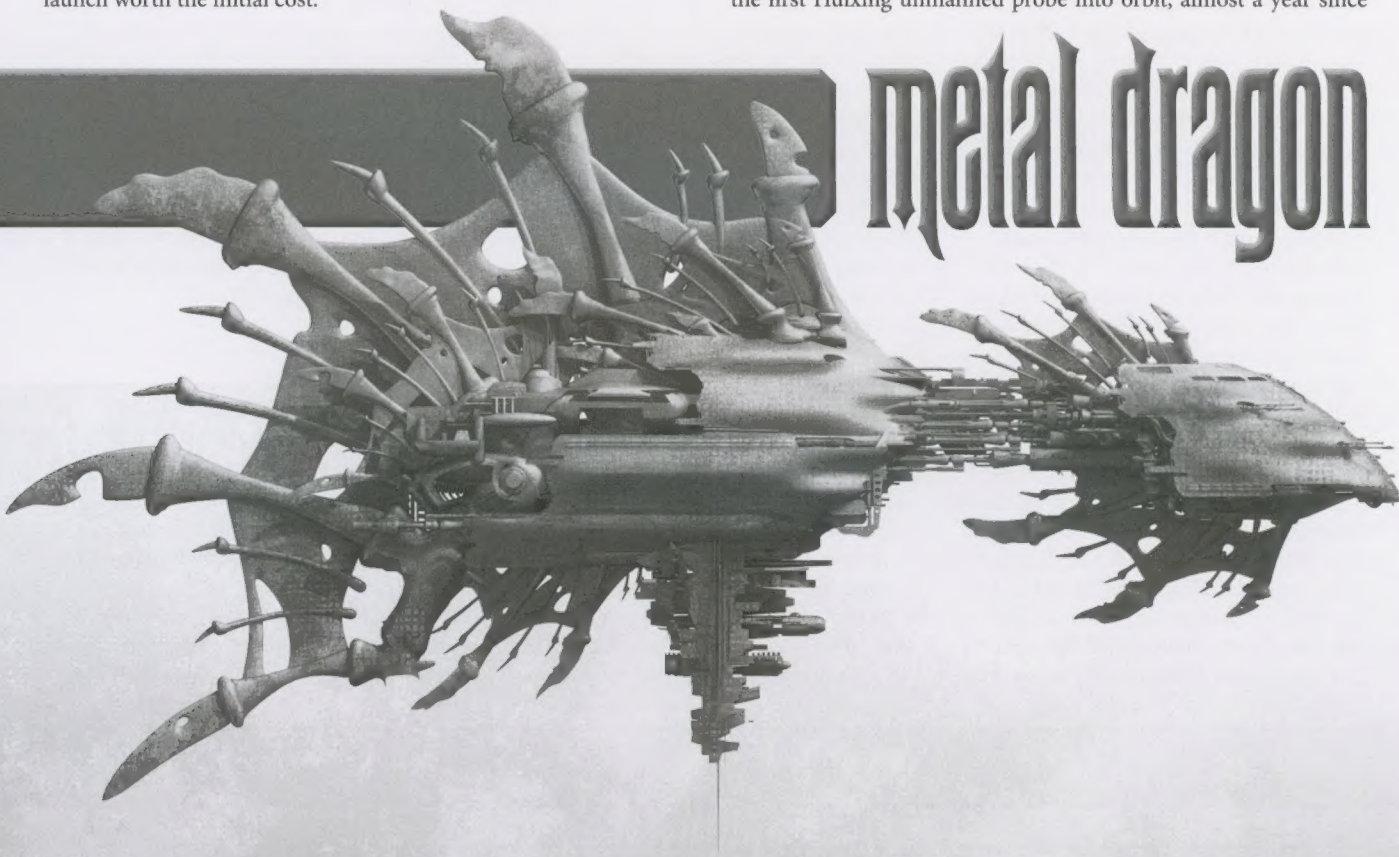
Yusuf nodded, and started across the gantry towards the exit.

Since the days of the Yongle emperor's Treasure Fleet, whose storied admiral Ma had been of the faith, a significant percentage of those who served in the Imperial Navy were Muslim. To save on time lost shuttling the faithful to and from prayer services, five times daily, in generations past a mosque had been constructed on the grounds of the Fujian shipyards – a modest structure, to say the least, but sufficient for the needs of the faithful.

Stepping out into the midday sun, Yusuf walked to an empty stretch of pavement in the narrow shadow of the launch scaffolding, the towering spire of the Tiankong rocket looming overhead. He faced west, towards Mecca, unrolled his mat, and began his bowing, feeling guilty that his present thoughts were still on the fuel trials, and not on the verses he was reciting. "O Allah, our Lord, all praise belongs to You."

It had been just over two years since the successful launch of the first Huixing unmanned probe into orbit, almost a year since

metal dragon



the launch of a monkey into orbit aboard Huixing Four, and the newly formed Ministry of Celestial Excursion had been demanding regular reports on their progress on putting human pilots into orbit ever since. The year of Metal Dragon, the thirty-second year of the Xuanton emperor's reign, had just begun, and Foreman Ounaminou's orders were clear: launch human taikonauts into orbit and return them safely to Earth by the year's end, or else.

Yusuf completed the final sitting position, the midday prayers nearly complete. "O Allah, I bear witness that what Muhammad taught is true. And that the Garden is true. And that the Fire is true. And that the Hour is coming, there is no doubt."

From high overhead came a popping noise, and Yusuf looked up just in time to see the tip of the rocket explode, high overhead, sending out a huge plume of orange and white flame, billowing noxious black smoke against the clear blue sky.

Yusuf had left behind his home in Tangier when he'd been just twelve years old, moving to Cairo and Al-Azhar University, where he'd studied law from a master of the Maliki madhab, as well as engineering and aeronautics.

When he had arrived in Cairo he already spoke both Arabic and Tamazigh, the native language of Morocco's Imazighen which, as an Amazigh, he'd been required by tradition to learn; at university, though, he also learned the Official Speech of the Middle Kingdom, the language of empire.

By the time he had departed Cairo on his *hajj* pilgrimage, traveling to the sacred cities of Medina and Mecca, Yusuf had mastered both the laws of god that governed man, and the laws which governed the flight of bodies through space. He had wanted nothing more than to become a pilot and take to the skies himself; unfortunately, following the War Against the Mexica, the ownership and operation of aircraft had been forbidden to all but the servants of the Dragon Throne. Once he had completed his *hajj*, then, and had followed in the footsteps of the prophet, Yusuf planned to journey on to the

Middle Kingdom, to the offices of the Imperial Navy of the Air.

Many long years had passed, and the closest he'd ever come to realizing his dream of flight was as a passenger in imperial cargo craft, while he spent his days using his knowledge of aeronautical engineering to build aircraft, and then rockets, to carry others beyond the bounds of Earth. All the while, Yusuf had remained on the ground, praying.

It was late evening before Yusuf left the shipyards. An investigation was already underway, but the little that was known so far was that Hsiao and four other members of the ground crew had been killed in the explosion, along with all three taikonauts – Deng, Loong, and Wei. Eight men dead, and along with them the Taikong One launch.

Taikong Two, which had originally been scheduled for early the following year, was in the final stages of construction, but its crew had not yet even been selected from among the potential pool of taikonaut candidates.

When Yusuf had radioed to the Northern Capital the unhappy news of the explosion, his only response from the Ministry of Celestial Excursion had been that, despite the tragedy, Yusuf was still expected to meet his mission goals by the year's end. Taikong Two was to be pulled forward, and launched before the end of Metal Dragon year.

It was almost time for the *isha*, evening prayers, when Yusuf arrived home. He opened his door, slipped off his shoes, and began to step inside, when a voice called from the shadows outside.

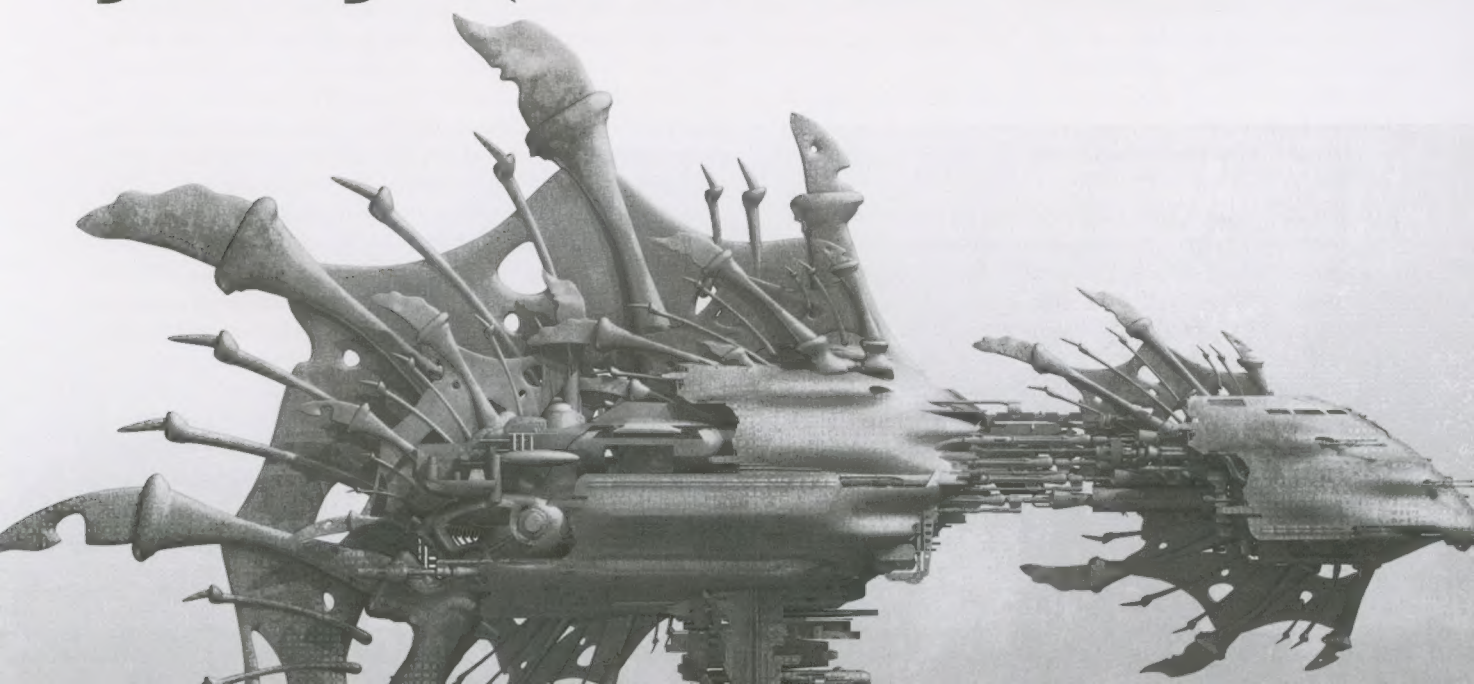
"As-salam alaikum."

Yusuf turned, startled, but sighed with relief when a familiar face entered the pool of light spilling out from the open door – a Khalifah, broad-nosed and ruddy-skinned, thick black hair completely hidden from view by the folds of his turban.

"Wa alaikum as-salam," Yusuf responded with a smile. "It is good to see you, Abdul-aziz bin Kitsepawit."

"And you, Yusuf Ounaminou." Abdul-aziz bin Kitsepawit stepped

year by chris roberson



closer, and embraced Yusuf like a brother. "Now, my friend," Abdul-aziz continued, speaking in his heavily-accented Official Speech, "I heard about an explosion at the shipyards today, and worried that you might have been injured in the blast."

"No, I am fine." Yusuf stepped back, holding Abdul-aziz's elbows at arms' length. "I was outside, and a considerable distance away, when the explosion happened."

"And the launch?" Abdul-aziz asked, sounding genuinely concerned. "Is it in jeopardy?"

"You might say that," Yusuf answered, his tone grim. "Taikong One is dead. It died with those eight men in the fire."

"But you've put so much of yourself into the project." Abdul-aziz shook his head, sadly. "I should know," he added with a wry smile, "I've heard you complain about it often enough, these past years."

Yusuf placed a companionly hand on his friend's shoulder. "And I thank you for endless encouragement and support, my good friend. I'm not sure what I would have done without you."

"Come," Abdul-aziz said, stepping towards the doorway, his arm around Yusuf's shoulders, "let us play a game of go, yes? Perhaps that will take your mind off your troubles, if only for a brief while."

"No." Yusuf shook his head. "I'm afraid I'm much too exhausted to concentrate on a game tonight. Tomorrow, perhaps? If you come early enough, I can arrange for Shui to prepare us an evening meal to share. Another dish from Khalifah, perhaps, to remind you of home."

"That would be splendid, Yusuf. A pleasant evening to you. Masalama."

"Masalama, my friend."

With that, Abdul-aziz disappeared back into the shadows of the night, and Yusuf closed the door behind him.

Yusuf's wife, Lin Shui, was waiting inside for him.

"My mother is asleep, and I have already put our son to bed, husband," Shui said, after they had exchanged their greetings, "but the boy is waiting up for his father to come and read to him." She paused, and read the worry writ large on Yusuf's face. "Go to him, and I will be waiting for you in our bed."

Yusuf smiled, lingered as he kissed his wife, there by the entry, and then went down the hall to his son's room.

"Ma?" Yusuf said, slipping through the narrow doorway into the small room. "You are awake?"

"Yes, father," the boy said, sitting up on his low cot, rubbing his tired eyes. "I'm not sleepy at all."

Yusuf smiled, and sat on the cot's edge. "Of course not. A son of mine, tired at this hour? Unthinkable."

The boy tried unsuccessfully to stifle a yawn, and then grinned sheepishly at his father.

"And what shall we read tonight, Ma?" Yusuf said, clapping his hands lightly.

"We started that fable about the lamp two days ago, remember?"

"Ah, I remember now." Yusuf nodded, smiling, as though he had actually forgotten. "Shall we continue it, then, or move on to a treatise on the aerodynamics of lift bodies?"

"Noooo, father," the boy said, rolling his eyes and sticking out his tongue. "The boy and the lamp, please."

Yusuf shrugged, broadly, and then reached over to the shelf set into the bedside table. He pulled out the slender volume, glancing at the cover. *'Ala al-Din and the Magic Lamp*, written by the Francais fantasist Antoine Galland.

"Shall we begin?" Yusuf asked, but the boy had already settled back onto the cot, pulling the sheets up to his chin, ready to listen.

Yusuf smiled, and flipped through the pages, looking for their place. "Very well. Now, where were we...?"

That night, Yusuf dreamt of Mecca. But not Mecca as it had been when he'd gone on his second *haji*, ten years ago, nor as it had appeared in photographs in news reports in recent years, after the bombing attack by an elite battalion of the Mexic Dominion's Eagle Knights, but as he'd seen it when he first traveled on the sacred pilgrimage, when he left Cairo, and traveled to the holy cities of Medina and Mecca.

When he woke, in the small hours of the morning, he could still feel the sense of community that he'd experienced circling the Kaaba in the circumambulation, surrounded by thousands upon thousands of his brethren from around the world, faithful Muslims from Africa, Arabia, Choson, Nippon, Espana, even far Khalifah on the other side of the world. Shi'ites and Sunnis, side by side, praying to the same god, following in the footsteps of the Prophet. He'd had a sense of euphoria that lasted throughout Dhul Hijjah, the month of *haji*, a sense that he and his brothers and sisters of the faith spread across the whole of the Earth, the world made one through their peaceful devotions. A euphoria that did not dissipate until weeks later, when he arrived in the Middle Kingdom, and presented himself at the offices of the Imperial Navy of the Air. A low ranking bureaucrat, who could not pass the examinations necessary to rise to a more prestigious posting, sat across a broad table from Yusuf and explained to him, in no uncertain words, why he would never pilot an aircraft. It took that crushing blow to drive the joy from Yusuf's heart. But had it ever really returned?

Years later, at his wife's insistence, he'd taken a few weeks off work at the shipyards, dressed in the clean white *ihram* robes, and flown to Mecca for an abbreviated pilgrimage. The journey from Fujian to Arabia had only served to make him envy the pilot his chance to fly. The pilot, a dullard from the steppes of Mongolia, took no joy in his office, laggardly shuttling his charges from airstrip to airstrip, as though he were steering a ferry across a sluggish river, not racing across the skies. Yusuf, whose astigmatism had kept him from qualifying for the pilot's exam, seethed in annoyance, clutching the hem of his *ihram* robes.

On landing in Mecca, Yusuf and the other pilgrims walked together to the Holy House, dutifully reciting the prayer of submission. But as they made their way through the narrow valley, their little company joined with the hordes of others, who had traveled overland across the desert from Rabigh in the north, or Riyadh in the east.

Yusuf had felt nothing of the elation of his first *haji*, only an in-suppressible annoyance at the jostling, foul-smelling mob around him, and the still, dry heat of the valley air, which he'd scarcely noticed in his youth, was now inescapable. The crowds, swirling around the black-curtained walls of the Kaaba, were so dense that, when passing the eastern corner, Yusuf never came near to touching, much less kissing, Al-Hajarul Aswad, the Black Stone.

At the time, Yusuf had felt that the holy city had changed somehow in the intervening years. That the world had become a meaner place when he was not looking. But now, lying in his bed in the still dark hours of the early morning, the sound of the Tiankong explosion still ringing in his ears, Yusuf knew that it was not the world that had changed. It was he himself who was no longer the same.

Yusuf arrived at the shipyards early the next morning. Before he'd even had his morning qahwah, he called the three surviving members of the Taikong One launch crew to appear before him – Ruan, Yan, and Diao.

When the men had assembled in Yusuf's small office, he explain-

ed to each of them their new roles, from this point forwards. "Ruan," Yusuf said, addressing the man previously responsible for environmental mechanics in the crew capsule. After Hsiao, he had been the most senior member of the team. "You're now my second."

His mouth drawn into a tight line, Ruan nodded. Yusuf knew that the man had been angling for an advancement in station for years, but knew too that Ruan had been a close friend to Hsiao for just as long, and that he took no joy in accepting the blood-stained position.

"Yan -" Yusuf addressed the man who heretofore had overseen propulsion " - Diao - " he turned to the man at Yan's side, who had been a back-up member of the Taikong One launch crew " - you are both now elevated in rank as a result of yesterday's...tragedy...and each of you will be required to take on additional responsibilities.

"However, given the short time before we must accomplish our goals, I'm afraid you don't have time to train your own replacements. As a result, you must continue to do your original tasks, while taking on your new roles. Everyone -" Yusuf looked around the room at the three men with a gesture that included himself, as well as everyone beyond the walls of his office " - *everyone* will have to work double shifts, if we are to get things done in time."

The men scowled, and Diao grumbled beneath his breath, but none of them complained outright. They were all as emotionally invested in the Tiankong project as Yusuf himself, and he knew that they all wanted just as badly as he for their mission to be a success.

After the noon prayers, Yusuf was back in his office when his assistant, a Hindi named Jaiveer, entered to tell him that he had a visitor.

"Who is it?" Yusuf said, not looking up from the papers spread before him.

"Commander Qiu Liwei," came a familiar voice, and Yusuf looked up to see a man dressed in the uniform of the Imperial Navy of the Air standing in the doorway. Yusuf had spoken with the commander on several occasions, since the first days of the Taikong project. A decorated pilot, Qiu had been seconded from the Imperial Navy to the Ministry of Celestial Excursion, and his was the responsibility to oversee the selection and training of taikonauts.

"Come in, please, Commander Qiu," Yusuf said, motioning the commander to a chair while Jaiveer backed out into the corridor, closing the door behind him. "What is it I can do for you?"

"What..." Qiu broke off, rubbing his blood stained eyes. Then, blinking rapidly, he continued. "Sorry. I'm...I'm not quite flying at full speed today."

"You'll have to forgive me saying so, commander, but you don't look very well."

The commander gave a rueful chuckle and, climbing to his feet, began to pace the length of the small office. "I was up all night on the radio. First with my superiors at the Imperial Navy of the Air, then with my superiors at the Ministry of Celestial Excursion, and then again with my Navy superiors, asking me what the Ministry bureaucrats had said, and finally radioing to the families of the three taikonauts who got themselves killed in yesterday's explosion."

Yusuf drew a heavy sigh, and nodded. "Yes, I had to radio the families of the five engineers and technicians yesterday afternoon. An...unpleasant task."

"Well," Qiu said with a shrug, "it is one of the necessary burdens of leadership, but I'd gladly pass it to other hands, if I could. I'd prefer the bickering and intrigues of ministry and military politics to that unpleasant duty, any day."

Qiu had continued the course of his pacing, and now stopped before an antique pistol, framed in a glass case on the wall. He looked

at it admiringly for a long moment, and then glanced over his shoulder at Yusuf. "You know, I don't believe I've ever noticed this before. It's the vintage of the War Against the Mexica, is it not?"

"Yes," Yusuf said, a little wistful. "It belonged to my wife's father, Foreman Lin, my predecessor at the shipyards. He served in the Army of the Green Standard during the last years of the campaign, and carried that pistol with honor. When he died, a few years after he'd given me his daughter's hand in marriage, I inherited his position, his office, and his wife who now lives with my family. In many ways I am living a continuation of his life, so it only seemed fitting to leave his heirloom there, on the wall."

A long silence fills the room, stretching out.

Finally, Yusuf took a deep breath through his nostrils, his chest expanding, and spoke. "But I doubt you have come to exchange news of our evenings, Commander, or to hear about my family's history."

"No," Commander Qiu said, shaking his head sadly. He slipped into the seat opposite Yusuf, and rested his hands on the front of the desk. "I've come for a status update on the Taikong project."

"But I gave the Ministry of Celestial Excursion an update this morning, and the Imperial Navy of the Air an update the night before. Nothing has changed since my reports."

"I have heard the official reports -" Qiu waved his hand in a dismissive gesture " - but I want to speak to you about the realities of their situation. We should speak as men, not as pawns of distant bureaucrats and politicians. I lost three good pilots last night, and you five of your best techs, to say nothing of a fortune in precision-engineered machinery that was blasted into dust and charred debris. And now our masters are instructing us that, while a delay of a few months is acceptable, pushing the date of the manned launch to next year or the year after is most definitely not. If this mission isn't successful, I'm going to find myself in a junker, flying patrols on the Vinland-Mexica border, and my life expectancy will be shorter than that of a bowl of rice in the hands of a starving man. I'm not sure what they'll do to you, but I assure you it won't be any more pleasant."

Yusuf steepled his fingers, and looked at Qiu thoughtfully. "You're asking whether it's possible to pull in the schedule of Taikong Two far enough that we can launch and land before the end of Metal Dragon year."

"Yes," Qiu said simply.

"Will you have the taikonauts ready to crew the mission?"

"If you have a rocket ready to light, I'll have the pilots to squeeze inside."

Yusuf nodded, and thought for a long moment. "Then you should start selecting your taikonauts at once. We will launch Taikong Two into orbit this year."

Qiu clapped his hands, and rose to his feet. "Well, then, I suppose I should let you get back to work." He opened the door, pausing only briefly to call back over his shoulder. "Good luck, Yusuf," the commander said, and then he was gone.

"I'm going to need it," Yusuf whispered, turning his attention back to the papers before him. "We all are."

A few days later, Yusuf was in his office, again, going over the reports from his crew. For the last several days the engineers had been combing over every bit of data they had about the accident. They were in the final stages of constructing the Taikong Two rocket, and if they could discover what caused the explosion of Taikong One, they could change the design to eliminate the flaw.

Yusuf's thoughts were interrupted by a knock at the door.

"Yes, what is it?" he asked, as Jaiveer appeared in the doorway.

"Ruan needs to speak with you, Master Foreman, and there is a man waiting at the gates to see you, as well."

"What's the man's name?" Yusuf asked.

Jaiveer consulted a slip of paper in his hands. "He says that it is Abdul-aziz bin Kitsepawit."

Yusuf nodded, and pushed back from his desk. "Have the guards escort bin Kitsepawit here, and go ahead and show Ruan in."

Jaiveer dipped his head in an abbreviated nod, and then ushered Yusuf's number two into the room.

"Ruan, what news?"

"Well, Foreman Ounaminou," Ruan said, drawing a heavy breath, "I'm pleased to report that construction on Taikong Two is proceeding more or less according to schedule, with our productivity impacted only marginally by the...by the change in schedule."

"Good, good," Yusuf nodded. It was to be expected, really, since the construction of the two Taikong projects had been performed by separate, more or less autonomous teams. The team responsible for Taikong Two had the same reporting structure as the Taikong One engineering team that was lost in the explosion, but from the mid-level managers down they were completely independent of the other team, for all intents and purposes.

"Unfortunately," Ruan went on, biting his lip, "the team analyzing the data from the explosion is no closer to discovering the cause of the conflagration."

Yusuf has hardly left his office in days, and then only to visit the site of the explosion on the launch pad, going home only for a bare few hours every night to try ineffectually to sleep. He'd become a stranger to his son in less than a week.

"We'll need to continue to pore over the data until we know the cause of the explosion. I just *can't* in good conscience put another flight crew and ground support team in the same situation, if we don't know what caused the explosion the first time."

"Foreman Ounaminou?" came a voice at the door, and Yusuf looked up to see a guard standing there, a familiar Athabaskan lingering behind him. "An Abdul-aziz bin Kitsepawit to see you?"

"Show him in," Yusuf said with a wave. "Abdul-aziz. I apologize for missing our dinner appointment earlier this week, but I have been busy."

"As I can see," Abdul-aziz said, squeezing into the room, moving to stand beside Ruan. He glanced over the papers piled high on Yusuf's desk. "You look tired, my friend. You are working too hard."

"I have duties to perform, Abdul-aziz," Yusuf said, shaking his head. "We have an unfinished rocket to launch into orbit by year's end, and there are only so many days in the calendar."

"Well, we all have our duties, but if you don't take better care of your health, you won't make it to the year's end yourself, and then where will your project be?"

From speakers in the corridor, they can hear the broadcast sound of the muezzin calling the faithful to prayer for the *maghrib* sunset prayer.

"Come, my friend," Abdul-aziz said. "Come pray, and when we are done, you and I shall go to your home, and your wife will cook for us."

Ruan stepped forward, a concerned expression on his face. "Foreman Ounaminou, I'm going to be staying late to supervise the investigation tonight, so we can do without your presence until tomorrow. You should go home, be with your family, and get some rest."

Yusuf rose wearily to his feet, placed a weary hand on Ruan's shoulder, and then, without another word, followed Abdul-aziz outside to pray.

Yusuf had met Abdul-aziz several years ago, shortly after he returned from his second *hajj*. He had been disillusioned after his trip to Mecca and, wanting to try to recapture the faith of his younger days, once back home in Fujian he sought out a Sufi master, or shaykh. After studying with the shaykh for some time, Yusuf had been welcomed into the *zawiyas*, or lodge. Here Yusuf found some small measure of comfort, studying the sacred writings. The succor that he could not find in the pages of the Qu'ran he now found at the feet of his master. He came to understand that there were three forms of knowledge, and that the intellection to which he'd clung since his days at Al-Azhar University was the lowest and least of the three. In time he came to grasp the knowledge of states, emotionalism, coming to perceive something supreme but not able yet to avail himself of it. He continued to strive for Knowledge of Reality, through which man can perceive what is right, what is true, beyond the boundaries of thought and sense – to attain to truth.

At the *zawiyas* Yusuf came to know another of the shaykh's adherents, Abdul-aziz bin Kitsepawit. Abdul-aziz had only recently come to the Middle Kingdom from the far distant Khalifah. He was an Athabaskan, one of the native peoples of the continent whose ancestors had adopted the faith of Islam brought to those shores by the early Muslim settlers from the Middle Kingdom. Abdul-aziz worked in the records department of the Fujian division of the Imperial House of Calculation. He had a wife and family back in Khalifah, who he wrote to often, but who did not visit him in the Middle Kingdom, as they could not afford the passage overseas. Someday Abdul-aziz hoped to save up enough to bring his wife over to the Middle Kingdom to live with him, but for the time being their constant correspondence would have to sustain him. Abdul-aziz also had a large extended family of siblings and cousins to whom he wrote, and who wrote him, on a frequent basis.

At first, Abdul-aziz was just a familiar face at the lodge. In time, he and Yusuf began to talk, informally, before and after the sessions with the master, and as months became years their informal talks spilled out into their lives, as the two met for meals, prayed with one another, and became closer than brothers. Yusuf had never had any siblings growing up, and found in Abdul-aziz a companionship he'd never known before. He praised god for his good fortune at finding such a friend, who was always at his side when he needed assistance or guidance.

Abdul-aziz had a quick wit and a strong mind. Often, when Yusuf found himself at a difficult juncture in developing a design, he would show his friend his schematics and, in many cases, simply the process of explaining the workings of a design to Abdul-aziz helped Yusuf to identify a flaw. Officially, Yusuf was not meant to show his designs to anyone not authorized by the Ministry of Celestial Excursion or the Imperial Navy of the Air to view them, but if his superiors had any notion of the invaluable assistance Abdul-aziz had provided to any number of projects over the last few years, most notably the Huixing and Taikong rockets, Yusuf was sure that they could not object. Yusuf had even shown his friend designs which Yusuf ultimately did not move past the initial development stage, using him as a sounding-board for ideas before bringing them to the rest of his engineering team. So far as Yusuf was concerned, Abdul-aziz had been sent to him by God himself.

Yusuf and his family – his wife, his wife's mother, and Ma, their young son – were joined by Abdul-aziz as they sat around a small table, eating their evening meal. Lin Shui, perhaps out of joy at having her husband back at home, if briefly, after so many days, had prepared several meals' worth of dishes, and the table before them

was piled high, crowded with plates of bisteeya, a large mound of couscous, a bowl of fish tangine, chicken with lemon and olives, and even a lamb kefta.

They ate in silence, for as long as they were able, each of them making a valiant effort to clear as much of the food off the serving plates as possible, but after a time each of them felt the need to take a break, their bellies swollen and their appetites well sated. Yusuf leaned back, sipping a cup of hot tea.

"Father," his son Ma began, pushing a pile of couscous from one side of his plate to another with a slice of chicken. "Today, in madrassa, we studied sura 122, about the Jinn?" The boy had a way of pronouncing simple statements as though they were questions.

"Yes, son?" Yusuf said.

"Well, I wanted to ask you whether the Jinn that the Prophet Muhammad –"

"Peace and blessings be upon him," Yusuf interrupted, scolding the boy gently.

"Peace-and-blessings-be-upon-him," his son repeated, hurriedly. "Are these Jinn the same from the stories, like the Fisherman and the Jinn, about demons and spirits trapped in jars by the seal of Solomon, obliged to perform services for any who free them from imprisonment?"

"Some would say so," Yusuf said. "The fifteenth sura teaches us that while the almighty created man from sounding clay, from mud molded into shape, the race of the Jinn, created before man, was made from the fire of a scorching wind. Thus are the Jinn lower than the angels, and are not immortal."

"And is it true that they live in the emerald mountains of Kaf which surround the flat surface of the Earth?"

"Who told you that?" Yusuf asked, eyes narrowed.

"A boy at my school."

"That is just superstition and nonsense, child," Yusuf said sharply. "Leaving aside the fact that the Earth is not flat, if there were emerald mountains of supernatural beings surrounding our planet, our remote-viewing mirrors would surely see them. They don't. If we do not credit the evidence of our senses we dishonor the almighty god who bestowed them upon us."

Yusuf's son shrank back into himself, cowed, and Yusuf quickly realized that his tone had been more strident than he'd intended.

"It is possible, Ma Ounaminou," Abdul-asiz said, leaning forward, "that many superstitions, though we may know them to be not literal truth, can still be instructive."

Ma smiled slightly, looking up into the face of the Athabaskan sitting opposite him.

"Now, finish your food, or you'll be sitting here all night," Yusuf said, playfully assaying the role of the stern parent. But Ma still shrank from his father's gaze, and kept silent for the remainder of the meal.

Later, the meal completed, Yusuf's wife and her mother cleared away the dishes as Yusuf and Abdul-asiz went out onto the patio garden, to smoke the hookah. Yusuf's son followed along, still somewhat cowed by his father's strong words.

"Do you see the stars of the Northern Ladle?" Abdul-asiz asked Yusuf's son, pointing up at the night sky as he arranged himself on a cushion.

"Yes," the boy said, lifting his eyes.

"Well," Abdul-asiz said, "in the land of my birth, ancient peoples thought that those stars marked the presence of an immense jaguar, one of four brothers who originally constructed the Earth. He was once shaped like a man, this jaguar, until he overstepped his bounds, and his brothers flung him into the seas. When he resurfaced, he had

been transformed into a jaguar, and after sending his new jaguar brethren to eat all that lived and walked upon the earth, he went to live among the stars. His brothers were forced to create the Earth all over again, rebuilding a better world in the jaguar's wake."

"That's not true, is it, father?" the boy asked, turning wide eyes to Yusuf.

Yusuf smiled, and shook his head. "No, but it makes for an amusing story, doesn't it?"

Yusuf's son nodded. "Yes," he said, gravely, and looked back at the Athabaskan, who smiled broadly in return, teeth shining white against his ruddy skin.

"Go get ready for bed, son," Yusuf said, reaching over to muss the boy's hair.

When the boy had gone, Yusuf drew the cool smoke of the hookah deep into his lungs, and shook his head, thoughtfully. He expelled twin streams of smoke from his nostrils, and glanced at the doorway through which his son had just passed. "It is...a difficult age."

"Do not worry, my friend," Abdul-asiz said, wearing a gentle smile. "This, too, shall pass."

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After the evening prayers, as they prepared for bed, long after their son was asleep and their guest had gone home, Yusuf's wife's mother already snoring in another room, Lin Shui sat on the edge of their cot, a quizzical expression on her face.

"Do you ever wonder, husband, about the wife of Abdul-asiz?"

"What do you mean?" Yusuf changed out of his work clothes, into the long tunic he wore to sleep.

"It just strikes me as odd, given the frequency with which Abdul-asiz mentions his wife, that she has never yet moved here to the Middle Kingdom, nor even visited. I know that for years Abdul-asiz has said that he would move his family to his side when he could afford to do so, but surely he's saved enough by now."

"What are you suggesting?" Yusuf asked, sitting beside Shui on the cot.

"I'm not certain," Shui said, her lips pursed. "Do you...do you suppose that he might prefer the company of men to that of women, and that's why he keeps his wife so far away?"

Yusuf sat bolt upright, shocked at the thought.

"Of course not," he said, perhaps overly quickly, overly loud. "Abdul-asiz is... He is *not* like that."

Shui's eyes widened, and she continued as though Yusuf hadn't spoken, still caught up in thought. "For that matter, do you suppose that she might not even *exist*?"

"Wife!" Yusuf said, jumping to his feet and rounding on her. "You forget yourself. That is my friend, and a brother in Islam that you malign."

Shui lowered her eyes, meekly, and muttered her apology.

"Now," Yusuf said coldly, slipping under the sheets, "let us sleep, and forget these words were ever spoken."

That night, long after his wife had fallen sleep, Yusuf lay sleeplessly on the cot, staring into the darkness. He could not help but wonder. The year before, Yusuf had rushed to his friend's side when he first heard the news of wildfires tearing through the southern countryside of Khalifah, verging dangerously near the township where Abdul-asiz's family lived. To Yusuf's surprise, Abdul-asiz had not seemed the least bit worried at the initial news, and it was only when Yusuf pressed the issue, asking whether he had word of his wife and parents, or any news that they had escaped the flames, that Abdul-asiz evinced any concern.

Yusuf was in the shipyards, looking at the skeletal frame of the crew module of the Taikong Two rocket. Ruan was there with him, as were Yan and Diao. They had discussed the matter from every possible approach, and the opinion was unanimous. While they had been able to incorporate any number of improvements into this new rocket, having learned from the development of Taikong One, they had still found nothing in the design itself which could account for the explosion.

"What about the atmospheric mix in the crew compartment?" Yusuf said, scratching his chest through the fabric of his tunic. "If it was too oxygen-rich, might a spark from some of the exposed electricals have caused an ignition?"

Ruan shook his head. "I was personally responsible for the development of the environmental mechanics in the Taikong One crew capsule, and we had made a careful study of the appropriate mix of nitrogen to oxygen to prevent just such a conflagration, and all of their early tests bore out that they had devised the appropriate ratio. Even if we hadn't done, though, an explosion of that sort wouldn't have carried beyond the reinforced walls of the capsule to engulf Hsiao and the others on the platform. The metal and ceramics of the hull are designed to protect the crew from the heat of re-entry, but they should just as easily protect anyone outside the hull from temperatures within."

"How about a fuel leak, Yan?" Yusuf asked. "If fuel were to ignite, it might be possible for flame to travel along the lines to the reserve tanks themselves. Obviously the tanks for the main stage rockets didn't fire, or none of us would have survived the blow, but there was sufficient fuel in the attitude adjustment rockets on the crew capsule to create a pretty big blast."

Yan, who had overseen propulsion on Taikong One, just as he now did with Taikong Two, thought for a brief moment, then shook his head emphatically. "No, Master Foreman, I'm afraid it just isn't possible. I personally checked over all the fuel lines and junctions on the crew capsule of Taikong One the morning before the explosion, and they were all sound."

"That's as may be," Diao said, breaking his characteristic silence. "But a fuel leak, and the resultant explosion, is the only reasonable explanation for the blast pattern that I've heard so far."

"Those fuel leads were *flawless* just a few hours before the explosion!" Yan said, arms folded. "There's no way that this system could have caused the explosion."

Yusuf turned his attention back to the skeleton of the crew module. There had to be some explanation for the explosion. It just was hidden somewhere they hadn't yet thought to look.

Yusuf arrived at the taikonaut training facilities, just outside the shipyards, questions and formulae still whirling in his thoughts.

"You requested to see me, Commander Qiu?" he said, as the commander approached him across the swept floor of bare, unvarnished stone. A short distance away stood a collection of boys that Yusuf at first took to be some school group touring the facilities.

"Yes, Foreman Ounaminou," Qiu said, waving him over to the group of boys. "I want to introduce you to the new men." Qiu pointed at each in turn. "This is Chieu, Chaim, and Ouyang."

Yusuf looked from the commander, to the fresh-faced, eager young men, and back again. "These...?" he began, then trailed off. "These are... the Taikong Two crew?"

"New-minted taikonauts," Qiu said, with a trace of irony, "fresh from their training regimen at the Imperial Navy of the Air."

Yusuf nodded, and shook each man's hand in turn, and though Yusuf spoke with them briefly, as soon as the conversation was over

he couldn't remember anything that was said.

Finally, Commander Qiu dismissed the three new taikonauts and, as they left, Yusuf stared after them, disbelieving. "They seem so..."

"Young?" Qiu said. "I know." He shook his head. "Believe me, I know. I've had a time finding even these three. The Ministry of Celestial Excursion is adamant that the first men to be launched into space must be either Manchu or Han. It is the emperor's wish, apparently, that one of these two noble bloodlines be the first to pierce the heavens. Which is all to the good, if the best candidates for the job that I continue to find in the corps of the Imperial Navy of the Air weren't Hindi, or Arabian, or Ethiop, or Athabaskan, or Briton. I'm having to pass over qualified pilots to meet the political agendas of bureaucrats."

"What happened to all of the qualified Manchu and Han pilots?"

"Honestly?" Qiu raised an eyebrow, and leaned in conspiratorially. "Most of them are dead. They tend to get the choicest assignments, which include piloting new, experimental craft, which leads to a higher mortality rate than is average. And those that survive to a reasonable age are usually promoted out of the cockpit and into an administrative position, which our bureaucratic masters view as a 'reward.'" Qiu scowled, and was silent for a long while.

"You want to go up there, don't you?" Yusuf asked, at length. He pointed, not to the ceiling, but beyond it. "Into orbit."

"Don't you?" Qiu asked.

Yusuf nodded. Then he pointed to his left eye. "Astigmatism. Kept me out of the pilot's seat when I was a younger man."

"You wanted to be a flyer, too? I don't think I ever knew that." Qiu nodded slowly, looking at Yusuf with new respect. "That's a damned shame. I think you would have made a fine one. Me, they need too badly here on the ground, I'm afraid. The only way I'd be going up would be if they couldn't find a single other pilot to take the spot, and even then they'd send paperwork up in the capsule with me, to keep me busy."

Yusuf and his family dined again with Abdul-asiz. That night, after the evening prayers, when Abdul-asiz had gone home, Yusuf read to his son from the adventure of Sindbad the Sailor. In the story, Sindbad finds himself in a barren, rocky valley, the floor of which is littered with fabulous gem stones. The sailor is preyed upon by merciless rukhs, giant birds who swoop down from their perches high above the valley floor, preying on anything that is luckless enough to fall in their path. Only by tying himself to the skinned carcass of a dead sheep, which a rukh plucks up and carries far away in his talons, is the resourceful sailor and merchant able to survive to enjoy further adventures.

Yusuf struggled to go to sleep that night, and when he did, he dreamt fitfully of riding atop a huge, ferocious bird, who shot flames from his mouth and from his hind end, screaming through the sky. The bird carried Yusuf higher and higher, the ground below dropping away until it was no longer visible, and just as the air thinned around him and the stars twinkled into view on all sides, he woke up.

Lying in the darkness, his heart pounding in his chest, Yusuf could still feel the sensation of movement in his stomach, and he grit his teeth to bite back tears.

Yusuf signaled to Yan that they were ready to proceed, and retreated behind the bunker. They were testing out a new firing configuration for the rockets in the final stage. The test rocket was bolted to the ground, set to be operated remotely, and instruments were gauged to determine the amount of thrust produced. Only bare months remained until the launch.

Yan was worried about the final burst of speed needed to reach escape velocity, as he had been for weeks. "I wonder," he said, his hands lingering over the firing controls, "whether we shouldn't consider adding an additional pair of thrusters to the final stage module."

Yusuf shook his head, a weary but gentle expression on his face, the one he wore when he answered any of his son's seemingly interminable questions about the logic in his bedtime stories. "And add the attendant mass for the rockets themselves, to say nothing of the fuel? No. Tie two birds together, and neither can fly, even though they now have four wings between them. Don't worry, Yan, the calculations are correct."

Yusuf and Abdul-asiz sat out on his patio, smoking a hookah, looking up at the stars overhead.

"So how is the Taikong Two rocket progressing, my friend?" Abdul-asiz asked, his tone mellow and relaxed.

Yusuf sighed, deeply. "I worry sometimes that we are too incautious, and other times that we are being too careful."

Abdul-asiz thought this over, and shrugged. "I find it hard to see how one could be *too* careful, in such an enterprise."

"It is like the story the shaykh told us at the lodge, that summer, of the king whose astrologer told him that he would die at a certain hour, on a certain day. The king had no desire to leave this life, and had constructed a fortress of solid rock. When his fortress was completed, he posted numerous guards at his gate, and went inside. He would remain within, until the appointed hour had been and gone, safe from any calamity. One day, within his fortress, he realized he could still see daylight, at the top of a doorway. He found an opening, a bare space through which a poison snake or scorpion might pass. And so the king sealed up the opening, to prevent misfortune from entering. In blocking the door, the king made himself a prisoner with his own two hands, sealed in so tightly that even air could not enter. And so, because of his extreme caution, on the appointed hour the king suffocated, and was no more."

Abdul-asiz nodded, and took a long draw on the water pipe.

"An instructive fable," Abdul-asiz said, at length. "It is fortunate, then, that your taikonauts will carry their own supplies of air with them, no?"

Yusuf smiled, nodding.

"Tell me, friend Yusuf, do you ever think about your old dreams of flying? When we first met, you used to mention those ambitions often, but you haven't for some long time."

Yusuf shook his head, ruefully. "There are things that it doesn't profit one to dwell upon, my friend."

"Does it not rankle to think that nothing but a bureaucratic requirement prevented you from taking to the skies as you'd always dreamed? Your eyes work as well as any pilots. So you've got a minor astigmatism. What of it?"

Yusuf sighed. "That is the requirement of the emperor's law, and who am I to gainsay it?" He paused, and drew a deep breath. "Even if the law is unjust."

"But doesn't the master teach us that unjust laws, by definition, are not in keeping with the commandments of the almighty?"

Yusuf took a deep pull on the hookah, and held the smoke in his lungs for a long while before answering. "What choice do we have, my friend? We either obey the laws of men, or find ourselves imprisoned. Or, I suppose, we could defect to the Mexic Dominion, but I doubt such as we would fare much better there."

Yusuf chuckled and, after a long moment, Abdul-asiz joined him with faint laughter.

Yusuf was with Ruan, reviewing the electricians in the crew compartment. Only a few weeks remained in the year, only a few weeks until the Taikong Two would launch, and everything had to be in readiness.

Yusuf's assistant Jaiveer rushed in, all out of breath. "Master Foreman! There's been an accident. At the taikonaut training facility."

"Serious?" Yusuf asked, his heart in his throat.

"There has been a fatality, Master," Jaiveer said.

"Ruan," Yusuf said, already heading for the door, "stay at your post and continue working. We don't have any time to spare. Jaiveer –" Yusuf snapped his fingers, to catch his assistant's attention, which seemed to be drifting with thoughts of tragedy "– stay and help Ruan with whatever he needs."

At the training facility, in the large open area beyond the main building, Yusuf found Commander Qiu, near the armature used to prepare the taikonauts for the intense forces of acceleration they would feel at lift-off. The armature, a long pole designed to spin on an axis, with a chair on one end balanced by a counterweight on the other end, was lying in pieces on the ground.

"What happened?" Yusuf asked, coming to stand beside Qiu. Chieu and Ouyang stood nearby in their taikonaut training uniforms, whispering to one another in somber tones. A party of technicians was crowded around the acceleration chair, which was pinned beneath a long section of the pole, nearly a hundred meters away.

"The axle froze up when the acceleration chair was up to ten g's," Qiu explained, pointing to the chair, "and the chair and the counterweight both just kept going." He pointed in the opposite direction, where the counterweight had crashed into the walls of a nearby building.

Yusuf looked from Qiu to the two taikonauts standing a short distance off, and understood immediately. "It was Chaim, then?"

Qiu nodded.

A long silence followed, filled with thoughts neither man needed to voice.

"So what will you do?" Yusuf finally said.

Qiu shook his head, looking defeated. "I'm not sure. We'll never be able to train another pilot up in time, even if I could find a potential candidate. And I'm not even sure another candidate is out there."

Yusuf looked at Qiu. "What about you? You know more about the Taikong rocket than anyone who didn't help build it, and you're the most qualified pilot I can think of."

"No," Qiu said sharply. "No, they wouldn't allow it."

Yusuf set his mouth in a line. "They don't have a choice. If they want the launch by year's end, it's you or no one, I'm afraid."

Qiu took a heavy breath, and sighed. He looked up, shielding his eyes against the bright sun. "Out to orbit and back, eh? I didn't want it this way, I can tell you that."

"Few of us live the life we'd have chosen for ourselves," Yusuf said, laying a hand on the commander's shoulder. "Wisdom lies in making the most of what we're given."

Yusuf was outside the main offices, looking through a remote-viewing mirror at the Taikong Two rocket. It had been assembled and was already out on the launch pad, the better part of a kilometer away. It was a slender spire, painted in shades of scarlet and gold, with the emblems of the eight banners picked out along the side. The crew module, for the moment visible until the fairings were craned into place, had a dragon motif, imperial yellow in honor of the emperor, with the fixtures and fittings plated in gold.

In two days time, just before sunrise, the three taikonauts, Commander Qiu in the lead, would climb into the crew module, the

protective fairings would be bolted into place, and the final countdown would begin.

"Master Foreman," came a shouted voice to him, carried on the wind. Yusuf turned to see Jaiveer running up to him. "There are men waiting in your office."

"Who?" Yusuf shouted back, rising to his feet. "Are they dignitaries come early for the launch?"

Jaiveer skidded to a stop in front of Yusuf, and bent double, his hands on his knees. Panting, he said, "They would not identify themselves, but they were obviously high ranking figures, by their dress, and by the fact that they were able to get by the military guards at the gates unmolested."

Yusuf handed Jaiveer the remote-viewing mirror, and took off for his office at a jog, leaving his assistant to catch his breath.

At his office, Yusuf found two men waiting for him. One was a complete stranger to him, but the other he knew very well indeed, if only by reputation.

In his childhood in Tangier, Yusuf had read and reread the popular accounts of the aces of the Imperial Navy of the Air, primarily their activities in the War Against the Mexica, which had ended when he'd been just a few years old. He had thrilled to stories about ace squadrons like the Flying Immortals and the Spirits of the Upper Air, but none commanded his attention like the Golden Dragons. The aces of the Imperial Navy of the Air, these brave aeronauts piloted their craft in dogfights against the slow, lumbering, but still-deadly airships of the Mexic Dominion's elite Eagle Knights.

Yusuf had grown up in that brief span in which the Dragon Throne ruled the whole world. At the close of the War Against the Mexica, the forces of the Middle Kingdom were triumphant, and all of the lands of the world were brought beneath the banner of the Dragon Throne. It was not to last. Just as Yusuf was nearing thirty years of age, insurgent forces in the Mexic peninsula rose up, ousted the forces and representatives of the Middle Kingdom from their land in a bloody revolt, and established the Mexic Dominion. In the ten years since, there had been a strange, lingering hostility, a war that remained somehow cold, as the two forces chafed against one another at their borders, each trying to extend its sphere of influence. A war of tiny cuts, bombing raids and strategic hits, without all-out conflict. A conflict which had little room for warriors like the one who now sat in Yusuf's office.

Sitting in the plain, straight-backed chair facing Yusuf's desk, resplendent in his surcoat emblazoned with the golden pheasant of a civil official of the second rank, was Admiral Zhuge, formerly of the Imperial Navy of the Air, now the civilian head of the Ministry of Celestial Excursion, awarded the Most Precious Order of the Imperial Throne and presented with the Peacock Feather by the emperor himself. More significantly to Yusuf, who felt a frisson of the thrill he'd forgotten since childhood, Zhuge had been an ace during the War Against the Mexica, and had led the storied Golden Dragons.

Beside him sat a man of unremarkable features, dressed in the plain gray robes of a civilian of meager means.

"Admiral Zhuge, your excellency," Yusuf said, bowing low.

Zhuge waved his hand, dismissively.

Yusuf remained partially bowed, his eyes flicking to the admiral's plainly-clothed companion, not sure whether he merited a deeper bow or a more shallow bob of the head.

"Master Ounaminou, Zhuge said," following Yusuf's gaze, "allow me to present Agent An of the Eastern Depot."

Yusuf's eyes widened, and his mouth hung open momentarily as his thoughts raced. *The Eastern Depot?* he thought. So this An

was a member of the Embroidered Guard, the emperor's own secret police. What had Yusuf done wrong to merit their attention?

Yusuf's thoughts raced, but finally he realized that he was still frozen in position. Unsure what sort of courtesy a secret policeman's position demanded, he bowed as deeply as he had for the admiral, to be on the safe side.

"Enough kowtowing, Master Ounaminou. We've little time for polite observations."

Agent An spoke, his voice sounding restrained but deadly, like a tiger on a leash. "I'll come right to the point, Master Ounaminou." He pulled a waxed-paper envelope from within the folds of his robes, and unwrapped it, revealing a stack of grainy, grayscale photographs.

"These were brought back from the Mexic Dominion by a Middle Kingdom Bannerman stationed in Fusang, who at the instruction of my office had snuck across the border into Mexica-held territory on a reconnaissance mission."

Yusuf looked at the photographs spread before him, which depicted a squat, wide-bodied rocket ship, standing next to scaffolding. This rocket was easily three times bigger around at its base than the Taikong rocket out on the platform, though its sides climbed at a steeper angle, so that at its nose it was even slimmer than the Taikong crew module.

"Can you tell us what this is?" An asked.

"It's a rocket?" Yusuf answered.

"Of course we know it's a rocket, man," Admiral Zhuge said. "What we need to know is, will it work?"

"When were these photos taken?"

"Just last week," An said.

Yusuf studied the photos closely. The design seemed familiar, though he could not recall where he'd seen it before. "I suppose it would theoretically work. This massive first stage –" he pointed to the wide base of the rocket – "contains, what? A dozen thrusters? That would push the rocket to escape velocity only shortly after liftoff. The later stages would add only marginally to the acceleration, and so would require much less fuel onboard. It's a terrifically inefficient design, though. In fact, in the early days of the Huixing project..."

Yusuf broke off, and his eyes widened, fractionally.

"What about the Huixing project?" Admiral Zhuge asked, leaning forward.

Yusuf looked at the photos again. He shook his head. "Oh," he said, swallowing hard. "Well, I'd briefly considered such an approach for the Huixing rocket in the early stages, but rejected it in the concept phases as inefficient. I never even brought the initial sketches and calculations to the rest of the design team."

Agent An nodded. "So, though the design is not as effective as our own, in your expert opinion this is still a launch-worthy vehicle?"

"It's hard to say without looking at their thrust-to-mass values, but from the basic architecture, it would appear to be sound."

Agent An nodded again, a short motion without any wasted energy, and carefully stacked the photos into a neat pile and wrapped them back in the waxed-paper envelope. He turned to Admiral Zhuge. "I've got everything I need."

Admiral Zhuge blinked slowly, thoughtfully, and looked at Yusuf. "Are we on track for the launch of Taikong Two, Master Ounaminou? Will we be able to get our men into orbit and back, before this week is out?"

Yusuf paused for a brief moment, his thoughts elsewhere and racing, and finally nodded. "Yes, excellency, I believe that we will."

"Your beliefs are irrelevant in this instance, Master Ounaminou, only the facts are pertinent."

"Yes," Yusuf said, more forcefully. "We will succeed in our mission."

"Good," Admiral Zhuge said, pushing to his feet.

"The reports from Fusang are that our man is back in Mexica with a radio transmitter," Agent An said, "so we'll know in short order if they make a launch. So long as we can get this rocket of yours into the air before they launch theirs, honor and the emperor will both be satisfied."

"And if it appears they may beat us to the finish line," Admiral Zhuge said, straightening his surcoat, "perhaps your man is in a position to, shall we say, delay the Mexica's efforts?"

Agent An smiled, which made Yusuf's blood run cold.

"Our man is resourceful," Agent An said, "as are all who serve the Eastern Depot."

"Thank you for your assistance, Master Ounaminou," Admiral Zhuge said, making for the door.

Yusuf bowed.

"I shall look for you at the launch the day after tomorrow," Zhuge went on. "A glorious day for the empire and for all who serve the Dragon Throne." Then he was through the corridor, and out of sight.

"Master Ounaminou," Agent An said, sparing a brief glance at Yusuf, and then followed the admiral out into the corridor, leaving Yusuf alone with his thoughts.

.....
Yusuf did not go home that night, sending word to his wife that his responsibilities demand he remain at the shipyard. He stayed all night in the shadow of the scaffolding at the launch pad, hidden from view.

It will be tonight, he thought. Tomorrow night the crew will already be loading into the crew module, and the launch technicians and engineers of the ground crew will be swarming everywhere. Tonight there is only a skeletal crew on hand, making final adjustments and repairs, while everyone else is at home, getting some much needed rest before the most important day of all their lives. It will be tonight.

When the muezzin called the faithful to the evening prayers, several of the technicians on hand left their posts to pray. Yusuf had to resist the temptation to go to prayer himself. He hoped the almighty would forgive him.

There were, by now, only a handful of engineers and technicians still on hand, and those few scattered far and wide around the launch site.

Yusuf waited, his hand resting on the heavy object stuck deep in the folds of his robe.

He arrived just as the evening prayer began, precisely as Yusuf had suspected he would, when there were no other workers in view. Dressed in the uniform of a shipyard worker, in the dim light and at a distance no one would have challenged him. But Yusuf could recognize his distinctive gait at any distance.

Yusuf stepped out of the shadows, and trained Foreman Liu's pistol on the approaching figure. The pistol was older than Yusuf, but he trusted it would still fire. "Abdul-asiz," he said. "I had hoped, in the final moments, that I was wrong."

"My friend," Abdul-asiz said, his tone one of shocked surprise. "What is this about?"

Abdul-asiz stepped closer, and Yusuf tightened his grip on the pistol.

"Stay where you are!" Yusuf shouted. "And get your hands up."

Abdul-asiz smiled, slightly, but took a step backwards and raised his hands above his head.

"I showed those designs to no one but you, Abdul-asiz," Yusuf gestured with the pistol, punctuating his speech with its barrel. "Not even to Lin Shui. And if the Mexic designers hadn't followed my plans so closely, even I might not have noticed. But they copied

my designs to the smallest specifications. That is *my* rocket."

Abdul-asiz shrugged.

"And it was you who disabled the fuel lines in the Taikong One, wasn't it?" Yusuf's lip curled, remembering the smell of roasted bodies which had lingered in the shipyard air for days. "What was your purpose? To delay the launch long enough that your masters in the Mexic Dominion could finish their own rocket and beat the Dragon Throne into orbit?"

"Something like that," Abdul-asiz said.

"I thought you were my friend."

"But I am your friend," Abdul-asiz objected. "Certainly, at the beginning, you were just an assignment. I'd been placed in the Imperial House of Calculation to track the development of military technology, and when the Ministry of Celestial Excursion was formed I was ordered to befriend any highly placed individuals in the development chain. But in the years in which we've known one another, I've truly come to look upon you as a friend."

"Friends do not betray one another, Abdul-asiz. Of course, that probably isn't even your name, is it?"

"What does it matter?" Abdul-asiz said, dismissively.

"Do not turn me in, my old friend. It will go badly for you, if you do. If I am to be convicted of stealing state secrets, how can you yourself escape recrimination, who confided them to me?"

Yusuf bit his lip, and his aim wavered slightly.

"The Mexica have need of minds like yours, Yusuf. If you come back to Mexica with me, I can arrange for you to be part of the Dominion's space program. You can go into orbit, Yusuf. Up among the stars, like you've always dreamed."

"What about my family?"

"I can only bring you with me now. Perhaps they might follow us at some later date, but I cannot guarantee it."

"You ask me to choose between my family and my dreams of flight?"

Abdul-asiz nodded, smiling. "I can make all your childhood dreams a reality, my friend."

"Masalama, my old friend," Yusuf said, shaking his head, and then pulled the trigger.

.....
Yusuf went home, after returning the pistol to the case in his office, and read to his son from the seventh voyage of Sindbad the Sailor. In the passage from which he read, the luckless sailor found himself carried into the upper reaches of the atmosphere by winged demons in the shapes of men, carried so high that he could hear the angels glorifying God in the vault of heaven.

In the story, Sindbad, who mistakes his demonic companions for angels themselves, prays out loud, saying, "Glory be to God, and His is the praise." When fire issues from heaven and almost consumes the flying demons, punishment for such debased creatures speaking the name of the almighty, Sindbad is dropped down to earth, left alone, never to mount to the heavens again.

Yusuf put his son to bed, and then went outside to his patio. He lit his hookah, and looked towards the shipyards. Abdul-asiz's body, hidden beneath the main thrusters on the launch pad, would not be found by the ground crew, and when the rockets fired, early the next morning, the body would be burned to ash by the intense heat, no trace of it to be found. And from those ashes would rise a new star, to climb briefly to the heavens, before being dragged back down to Earth. ✨

Chris's forthcoming novels *The Dragon's Nine Sons* (Solaris) and *Iron Jaw & Hummingbird* (Viking) are both part of the Celestial Empire sequence, as is the work in progress *Three Unbroken*, a novel for Solaris that will be serialised online.

BENJAMIN ROSENBAUM MOLLY AND THE RED HAT

Molly loved her red hat. It was full and round and bright. It was glorious and unadorned. That hat knew more than it was saying. It could have been a ladybug, it could have been a tomato, or a red red lipstick-red dragon of fire. But it held still and was just a hat, and Molly loved it for that.

Then one day Molly's mama bought her a little blue hat. It was sly and superficial and it didn't know any secrets at all. Molly smiled politely and said thank you. She didn't want her mama or the blue hat to be insulted. She put her red hat on the peg and wore the blue hat that day. But before she went out she pressed her mouth into the red hat and whispered, "I love you and I'll always want you."

When her little brother Billy came out into the garden, Molly realized that her mama had bought him a blue hat just like her new blue hat. Molly was polite and didn't say what she thought about that.

But as Molly's mama bustled out of the house in a jingle of keys, Billy burst out crying. "Mama come with!" he said.

"Have you been teasing your brother, young lady?" Molly's mama said sharply, opening her car door.

Molly felt like a playground swing had gotten its chains tangled up and kicked her off onto the ground, wham, dirt up your nose and no air left for breathing. She grabbed the blue hat with both hands and tugged it over her ears, to keep from saying anything mean.

She hadn't teased Billy, not even once, since her Daddy moved away.

"I'm already late," said Molly's mama to Billy, kissing him on the head and removing his hands from her coat. "Molly will walk you, honey. Aren't your hats darling?" She shut the car door and drove off, vroom, without saying goodbye to Molly.

At kindergarten Molly put away the blue hat in her cubby and went bareheaded. Mrs Telliveller raised her eyebrows in surprise. Mrs Telliveller was the youngest in a line of powerful kindergarten teachers stretching back to the days of Morgan le Fay, and she was no fool. Molly blinked twice to let Mrs Telliveller know that The Hat Would Be Back.

Molly was considerably less powerful without her hat, and the other kids knew it. Devilish Denise drew with purple crayon all over Molly's drawing of an octopus and Molly let her. Craven Cristoph and Unpleasant Umberto took all the green blocks and wouldn't let her have any, and Enervating Emily and Spurious Sue cut in line in front of Molly at lunch. None of them would have dared, if Molly weren't hatless.

So understandably Molly rushed back home, dragging little Billy by the hand so quickly that he fell down twice and started to cry. Molly apologized and sang him 'I've Been Working on the Railroad' and dragged him home a little slower.

But when Molly got to the peg, the Red Hat was gone.

"Where's my hat?" she said to her mama.

"Your old hat? Honey, it's too small for you. Don't you like your new hat?"

"Where - is - it?" Molly said.

Her mama said, "I threw it out."

Then Molly raged:

IN-SUPPORT-ABLE!

IN-DEFENS-IBLE!

IM-POSSIBLE!

IN-SUFFERABLE!

And Not O.K.!

Molly threw the blue hat on the ground and kicked it, and her mama took her to her room and left her there.

Oh red hat!

Oh red hat!

Oh red hat!

At dinner Molly still wasn't happy but her mama said, "I'm sorry I threw your red hat out, honey." So Molly, who knew how difficult it is for adults to apologize, said, "Okay."

But it wasn't okay.

So that night Molly brushed her teeth extra fast and got into her pajamas herself. When her mama was still struggling with Billy's teeth and toothbrush, Molly bounced on the special place on her bed and flew

out the window

and onto the pine tree branch

and bounced

over the roof and onto the top of the telephone pole

and skated along the wires

to the forest

to visit the Queen of the Owls.

The Queen of the Owls was drinking tea in a metal cup. Her white hair stuck out all over her head. She wore twelve coats and gloves with holes where the fingers poked through, red and bent. She had a fire going in an old paint can, and twelve owls sitting around her in a circle: a snowy owl, a great horned owl, a peat owl, a hoot owl, a screech owl, a night sky owl, a coriander owl, a tick-tock owl, a can't-see-it-when-you're-looking owl, a fight owl, a friendship owl, and an owl-who-isn't.

Molly was cold but she knew better than to warm herself at the fire of the Queen of the Owls without asking. She planted her bare feet in the snow and said, "I'm looking for my red hat."

"Mmm, yes," said the Queen of the Owls, and drank her tea. "Come warm yourself, dearie."

"Are you sure?" said Molly.

"Oh, yes," said the Queen of the Owls.

"Can I leave when I want to?" asked Molly.

"Oh, certainly," said the Queen of the Owls.

"And nothing mean will happen to me?" asked Molly.

"If you insist," said the Queen of the Owls.

So Molly darted past the tick-tock owl and sat in the lap of the friendship owl, who spread his wings protectively around her.

"Good choice," said the Queen of the Owls, looking disappointed. The tick-tock owl folded up his claws.

"Thank you," said Molly. "Now what about my red hat?"

The Queen of the Owls finished her tea and stared into the cup. The fire crackled, the cold night bit Molly's toes, and the feathers of the friendship owl ticked her cheeks.

"It's thrown out," the Queen of the Owls said finally.

"I want it back!" said Molly. "Where is it?"

"It's in the Outthrown Trashland, of course," said the Queen of the Owls, "but you're not brave enough to go there."

"Yes I am," said Molly.

"And even if you were, no one is brave enough to take you," said the Queen of the Owls.

Molly said to the friendship owl, "Will you take me?" But he blinked sadly and turned his head all the way around, and looked out into the night in back of him, so she could only see his feathers.

Molly looked at the coriander owl, but he did the same. So did the screech and the hoot and the peat and the great horned owl. So did the snowy and the night sky and even the brave fight owl. Molly didn't bother with the tick-tock owl. And the owl-that-isn't covered her eyes with her wings-that-weren't.

Then Molly got up from the lap of the friendship owl and ran out into the snow. She faced away from the fire and she closed her eyes tight and she covered them with her hands and she said, "Will you take me, can't-see-it-when-you're-looking owl?"

Molly felt the small claws of the can't-see-it-when-you're-looking owl grab the shoulders of her pajamas. She heard its little wings beating, and she was lifted into the air.

"Molly!" the Queen of the Owls called, and her voice sounded afraid. "Don't bring anything but the red hat back!"

Molly and the can't-see-it-when-you're-looking owl flew for a long time through the cold night. They heard the moaning of the moon and the scraping of the stars in their tracks. The dreams of bumblebees buzzed past them, and they flew through clouds of milk getting ready to rain upon the Doughlands. Molly kept her eyes tight shut.

Finally, Molly smelled trash, lots and lots of trash; and she heard the whispering groans and whimpers of everything lost and abandoned that wanted to find its way back to the world.

Molly's feet touched the ground. She opened her eyes and saw

- heaps of socks, unpaired
- scarecrows and bell towers
- a few newspapers and many oldspapers
- sundials, spinning jennys, and busts of Lenin
- last year's dolls and chewing gum
- the certainty that Man is in the center of the Universe
- the tennis shoes and basketballs of disappointed managers of fast-food restaurants in Oklahoma
- faith in Progress
- a billion pages of homework
- ...and a lot of other things.

Molly jumped through the air over great piles of junk and called: "Red hat! Red hat! It's Molly! I'm here!"

"Molly!" cried a voice, and Molly landed on the roof of her old house. It was enormous and fuzzy and full of gables and slants. There was a man who looked like Molly's Daddy, except that he was pale and had a rip through the middle of him stuck together with scotch tape.

"Molly!" he said. "Take me back!"

"You're not my Daddy!" Molly said. "My Daddy lives in San Francisco." She ran across the roof towards the chimney.

"I'm your mama's love for your Daddy!" the man said, running after her. "Take me back!"

"No no no no no no no no! That's not thrown out, you're lying!

I'm not taking back anything except the red hat!" Molly said, and she jumped down the chimney.

In the living room she crawled out of the fireplace, ran past dolls and wine glasses and her mama's diploma, and up the stairs, calling "Red hat! Red hat!"

She opened the door to the baby's room. There was Billy's old crib and Billy's old baby self in it - looking just like when he first came from the hospital, new and wrinkly and drooly and red. And there standing next to him, holding the bars of the crib, was an angry little green Molly flickering with fire.

"Hello Molly!" said angry green fiery Molly. "Take me back!"

"No!" said regular Molly and ran to the peg. There was her red hat hanging. Molly snatched it up and put it on her head. Then she jumped out the window and onto the roof of the house across the street. She faced away from her old house and closed her eyes and put her hands over them and called, "Will you take me home, can't-see-it-when-you're-looking owl?"

Molly felt the small claws of the can't-see-it-when-you're-looking owl grab the shoulders of her pajamas. She heard its little wings beating, and she was lifted into the air.

But just then angry little fiery green Molly jumped out the window, bounced off the roof across the street, and grabbed hold of Molly's ankle in her fiery green hand!

Regular Molly couldn't open her eyes. Her ankle burned and tickled. She kicked around with her feet, but little green Molly hung on tight. And so, that way, the three of them flew through the marshes of the night sky, and over the now baking Doughlands that filled the air with cookie smells, and heard the chuckling of the comets, and the muttering of the dawn gnomes sorting colors for the next day's dawn.

Finally Molly's feet touched the pine tree branch outside her bedroom window. The can't-see-it-when-you're-looking owl let go of her shoulders and fiery green Molly let go of her foot.

"Thank you, can't-see-it-when-you're-looking owl," Molly said, "and thank the Queen of the Owls for me." She opened her eyes and saw little angry green Molly slipping and sliding down the tree. Regular Molly pulled the red hat down tighter over her ears and jumped through her bedroom window and onto her bed.

She slipped her bare feet under the covers, because they had gotten quite cold.

Just then her mama came in, carrying Billy and his toothbrush. She stopped and stared at Molly's red hat.

"I found it," Molly said.

"How strange," said Molly's mama. "I thought I threw it out. It's still too small for you."

"Mama, please!" said Molly.

"We'll talk about it tomorrow," Molly's mama said. She put Billy in the other bed and kissed him on the head. Then she turned off the light and went out.

Molly reached under her red hat and rubbed the place on her head that her mama hadn't kissed.

When she looked over at Billy again, flickering green fiery Molly was in bed with him.

"You don't remember how it was, do you?" said angry green Molly. "That's the only thing I can think of to explain your behavior."

"What are you talking about?" regular Molly said, sitting up.

"Molly," said Billy, pointing at angry green Molly.

"We had Mama and Daddy all to ourselves," said angry green Molly. "All the hugs, all the kisses. All the stories, all the songs. All the tickles, all the laughs. And then this thing came."

"Molly - and - Molly!" said Billy, and laughed.

"And then all of a sudden, Mama could only ever hold this thing. It was always in her arms. It sucked her strength like a vampire. It drove Daddy away," said angry green Molly, and she put her hands over Billy's mouth and nose and shook him. Billy choked and struggled.

Molly leaped out of bed and pulled angry green Molly away from Billy. Billy gasped and started crying.

"You shut up!" Molly shouted. Her hands burned and tingled where she held angry green Molly. "You shut up or I'll pound you into jelly!"

"Fine," said little angry green Molly, slithering out of regular Molly's grasp. "Then I'll go make friends with the crows." And she jumped out the window.

The door banged open and Molly's mama came in. "What did you say, young lady?" she shouted. Billy kept crying and Molly's mama picked him up.

"What?" Molly said, standing in the middle of the room.

"I distinctly heard you threaten your little brother, and I am *very surprised* at you."

"No," Molly said, "I didn't -"

"Are you going to make it worse now by lying?" Molly's mama asked.

Molly shut her mouth.

Molly's mama shut the window and locked it. "We'll talk about this tomorrow," she said. "Shh, Billy, it's okay, you can sleep in bed with mama."

"No!" Billy snuffled. "Sleep - wif - Molly."

Molly's mama paused and frowned. Then she put Billy back in his bed. "Do you see how much trust your little brother has in you, young lady?" she said. "I hope you try and earn it from now on."

Then she went out.

Molly put the red hat on the windowsill to protect her and Billy, and she put Babar and Celeste and Rumpelstiltskin by the door. It was about all she could do. Then she got in bed and closed her eyes. Billy was already asleep.

The next day at breakfast, Molly's mama looked tired and didn't remember to argue with Molly about the red hat, so Molly wore it.

She walked slowly and carefully with Billy to preschool-kindergarten and sang 'It Takes a Workin' Man' to him and let him break icicles from under mailboxes and suck on them. She was having such a good time that she didn't see angry green Molly run up and snatch the red hat from her head.

"You give that back!" Molly shouted and ran after her.

Little angry green Molly laughed and ran, but Molly had longer legs and caught up with her. She pushed little angry green Molly to the ground and sat on her, and she got her red hat back.

Little green fiery Molly kept laughing, though, and that gave regular Molly a very creepy feeling.

She looked back down the road and saw a huge flock of crows flying up into the air with Billy.

"Billy!" Molly shouted and jumped into the air. She jumped as high as the chimneys, but it wasn't high enough to reach the crows. So she jumped onto the nearest chimney and then off the chimney into the flock of crows. She punched one crow as she flew by and it let go of Billy's arm, but some other crows grabbed it again. Molly fell down onto a snowy roof and slid off it in a small avalanche. When she pushed her way out of it, the crows were even higher. Billy looked like an ant.

Molly pulled the red hat from her head and held it in both hands. "Red hat, red hat, I know you just like being a hat, but if there's anything you can do, do it now!" and she threw the hat up in the air.

STEP INTO THE DARK



The red hat quavered and
paused and then
shook and
billowed and
unfolded and
was –

a red red lipstick-red dragon of fine red silk.

It flew up into the flock of crows and it smacked them with its tail. Pow! Pang! Zow! Zang! The crows went flying off. The hat-dragon caught Billy in its tail and flew him gently down. But as it flew down those crows came after it. They dodged its head and they tore at it with their beaks. Rip! And Strip! And Tear! And Shred! Finally the hat-dragon set Billy in a snowbank and fought back with its tail.

Molly raced for the snowbank and so did little green fiery Molly. Little green fiery Molly got there first. She grabbed Billy's hand and tugged him to the road and without even looking both ways she pushed him out into it –

but Molly pulled him back.

Then she grabbed little green fiery Molly and lifted her into the air.

"You can't win, Molly!" little green fiery Molly said. "You brought me back! I'm yours! I'm here to stay!"

"You're right," said Molly, and she put her mouth onto the forehead of little green fiery Molly and took a deep, deep breath, as if she was about to blow out the candles of a birthday cake the size of the moon. Little green fiery Molly only had time to say "Help!" once before Molly breathed her in and swallowed her.

Then she pulled Billy out of the snowbank, brushed the snow out of his face, and keeping tight hold of his hand, ran for the red hat.

The crows were gone, and all that was left of the red hat were a few shreds of red red lipstick-red fine red silk.

Molly sat down and started to cry, and Billy sat down next to her and cried too.

Mrs Telliveller had a good idea what sort of thing might have happened when Molly didn't show up, and came out looking. She sat down on the curb next to Molly, and she rooted around in her purse for some Kleenex and a cell phone, and she called Molly's mama at work right then. She explained a lot of things, gently, in terms that Molly's mama could understand.

Molly's mama took the day off work and took Molly and Billy home. She left Billy playing with some blocks on the floor and she took Molly onto her lap on the couch and let her cry for a long, long time.

And when Molly finally fell asleep, still holding the shreds of red silk, Molly's mama pressed her mouth into Molly's hair and whispered, "I love you and I'll always want you."

After that, sometimes Molly wore the blue hat to school. Sometimes she did tease Billy and fight with him. Sometimes she felt sick to her stomach, and then she could feel the other Molly crawling around in there. Sometimes, when she was very angry, you could see the other Molly looking out of her eyes.

But every night, when she went to bed, her mama kissed her goodnight. Molly's mama never forgot again. And all night long, Molly could feel that kiss on her forehead, warm and soft, keeping her safe. ✨

Benjamin lives near Basel, Switzerland, with his wife Esther and their alarmingly clever children, Aviva and Noah. Aviva really does sometimes sing 'There Once Was a Union Maid' to calm Noah down. Benjamin's stories have appeared in *Nature*, *Harper's*, *F&SF*, *Asimov's*, *McSweeney's* and *Strange Horizons*. His first collection, *The Ant King and Other Stories*, will be published next summer by Small Beer Press. More at benjaminrosenbaum.com

"mean, moody & absolutely magnificent" clare shepherd

BLACK STATIC



ILLUSTRATED by DAVID GENTRY

the MEN in the ATTIC JOHN RHELLER OLSEN

At first the scheme had sounded so easy to Kyle. And so right. “We download the guy into your head,” Trevor had explained, “with the virtual amenities to make his life comfortable. The organization stores the body in a safe place, while you go about your everyday life. And it’s only for a few weeks, until they can find a permanent refuge for him. It’s a perfect way to hide so-called enemies, and easier than having them in your attic.”

That was a few months ago. The underground had someone to hide urgently, and so Kyle had accepted. Then today Trevor brought bad news. Marty’s body had been found. The police have taken it into custody and are investigating.

Frightened, Kyle is sitting alone now on his back terrace on this hot September night. Crickets are singing, the scent of honeysuckle heavy in the air. Kyle’s wife Laura is still at the restaurant they own together, managing the dinner shift. She should be home soon. Kyle and the children had broiled salmon and salad for dinner, and now Yolanda is in her room studying. Little Randy has gone to bed.

He should go up to see his guests. He dreads it, though. How is he going to tell Marty that his body has been taken? And he’s in danger himself now, Kyle thinks. And so is his family.

Kyle thinks of Laura. Beautiful Laura, short and dark. Quiet and competent. The perfect partner for him, both in business and in life. She knows nothing of his dealings with Trevor and the underground.

In the bedroom Kyle closes the door, lies down and turns on the TV. If Yolanda comes in she’ll think he’s fallen asleep while watching the news. He closes his eyes, calls up the codes and accesses the system. The droning voices of the TV become suddenly strident, but only for an instant. As he drifts inside Kyle catches the name of Carson Benney, the last opposition leader still at liberty. The faint humming of the air conditioning is the last thing he hears from outside.

Kyle is fully inside his own head now. He walks up the virtual staircase to the virtual apartment where Marty and David have taken refuge. Now he’s standing before the door. Kyle thinks of the apartment as being at the very top of his brain. Humorously he calls it his ‘attic’. Maybe, he thinks, because this whole scheme is so crazy. How did he ever let himself get involved?

He rings the bell to let the men know that he’s coming. It’s good to respect the norms of physical appearances. It helps everyone to feel normal, and that helps morale.

Inside the apartment a long hallway with pastel walls opens before Kyle. He waits here a moment. Maybe the men will come to greet him. They’ll be worried. They always are when he comes unexpectedly. But no one appears and Kyle sets off down the hall, past the many doors, over the thick beige carpeting. Shelves of books

and DVDs line the walls, all virtual, all connected to the system. It’s a pleasant refuge that the underground has created, Kyle thinks, but it’s still a prison.

He passes David’s door and knocks at Marty’s. Marty may be there, working on his new novel. But there’s no answer, not even the sound of Marty virtually tapping on the keyboard of his virtual computer.

Next comes the observation room. The men won’t be in there. They only go there when Kyle lets them. It’s from there that they can see the outside world, experience what Kyle experiences – a hot shower, a good meal, an invigorating bicycle ride or workout at the gym – and they can hear what Kyle hears, see what he sees. They can’t take any action, or read Kyle’s mind, but if Kyle activates direct access, they can converse with him. That’s dangerous though, Kyle knows, since to an outside observer he may appear to be talking to himself. For direct conversation he prefers to come up to the apartment himself.

The hallway turns and there’s the control room. Kyle never lets the men in there. He didn’t want it installed, but Trevor had insisted on it as a safety feature. If a host were incapacitated for some reason, Trevor explained, a guest could take over temporarily.

Kyle doesn’t like the idea of someone else in control of his body.

The hallway turns again. Kyle goes past the side corridor, with its red door at the far end, a door that doesn’t open. Another safety feature, Trevor explained, an escape hatch. Kyle doesn’t know where it leads, or even how to open it. Trevor has always dismissed his questions. Kyle doesn’t need to know.

Kyle finds the two men in the living room. So much the better. It will be easier if David’s there. He’s a good man, strong in adversity, and will be a support for Marty. And David, too, is in danger now.

We are all in danger, thinks Kyle.

Poor Marty is devastated. Kyle knew he would be, but not to this extent. Martin Anthony Wells, a prolific popular novelist. Not of great literature, but of fascinating stories of twisted politicians and power mongering on a planetary scale. His stories sound so true. That was his crime.

But here, sitting on the couch opposite Kyle, Marty’s a broken old man.

David appears to sit next to him, appears to put an arm around Marty's shoulders. *Appears*, Kyle thinks, because it's just that. Like everything else in the attic. How important it is, he thinks, to physically feel things, to touch others. So much can be communicated by touch.

David Kane is not broken. A bit younger than Kyle – about forty-five, Kyle would say – vigorous, energetic and enthusiastic, sometimes blunt but always reasonable. David's a reporter. He had been covering the strikes in the west when his arrest warrant went out. His dispatches were blunt and reasonable. He got in trouble for doing his job.

David and Marty. It's a privilege to know them, Kyle thinks. Here inside his own brain, connected to the system that the underground has set up, Marty and David continue to live and write. Through the system they feed their works out to the clandestine media. It's dangerous, but it helps keep them sane.

Work and family. That keeps Kyle sane too.

Marty has a lot of questions. Is his body still in the same place? Are the police trying to bring it out of the sleep? What will happen to him here, if they awaken the body? What if the body dies? Were they betrayed by someone? What of the people at the house where his body was stored? What of his family, his wife and his grown sons, have they been harmed in any way? Tell me, Kyle, Marty pleads. Please tell me.

Kyle doesn't know much, except that so far the police are maintaining the life support. Even Trevor probably couldn't say more. The underground is vast and compartmentalized. You only know what and who you need to know. Kyle knows only Trevor and, to a lesser extent, Gill, who does the technical work in a secret lab in his basement.

That afternoon Kyle asked Trevor to connect, to give Marty the news himself, but Trevor refused. That was Kyle's job, Trevor said. You're the host, Kyle, their direct link to the outside. My job, Kyle thought. As if he didn't already have a heavy enough burden. Kyle respects Trevor, but he doesn't always like him.

Trevor had come to the restaurant that afternoon, asking to see Mr Kyle Barrett, and posing as a wine salesman. Not a wise move. This man in his late sixties – a retired university professor, with long loose hair, a green silk tie and a tweed jacket – might have been noticed by the employees. Laura certainly noticed him.

The lunch shift was over, the lights were down low, the place nearly deserted. They sat at a corner table in the air-conditioned bar and Kyle let him pretend to present his wines. Laura came by the table to ask something – Kyle can't remember what – she was getting ready for the dinner shift. Kyle introduced her, but Trevor didn't even have a phony visiting card to give her. Laura knows the names of all the wine distributing houses anyway.

She threw Kyle one of those looks of hers as she walked away.

Kyle accompanied Trevor out to the street, from cool dark to blinding heat. Standing in the afternoon sun, Trevor gave Kyle the news of Marty's body. With smiles and social niceties, they shook hands and said goodbye. As though they had just concluded a business deal.

But, thinks Kyle, none of this is now of any help to Marty.

Kyle talks with Marty and David for a while longer. But Laura is due home any minute, and he must leave. He tells them to go into the observation room if they like. They'll share a glass of wine when Laura comes in, direct contact de-activated, of course. They understand.

The television is still on as Kyle surfaces. News analysts are talking about Carson Benney, a former member of the Assembly. The regime

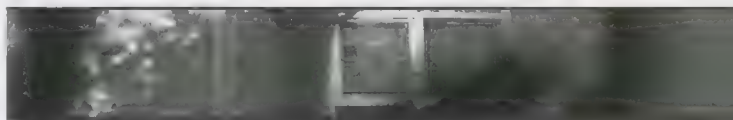
made sure he lost his last election, after his failed bid for his party's presidential nomination two years earlier. They had seen to it that a docile idiot got the nomination, someone sure to lose. So it was the incumbent, that raving crazy of the other party, who was elected yet again. A warrant has now been issued for Benney's arrest.

Kyle gets up and, pretending to appear groggy, walks down the hall towards the kitchen. But there's no need for this ruse. Yolanda's door is still shut. He can hear her tapping on her keyboard, writing up some report or other. So early in her last year of secondary school and she's already so hard at work. Kyle has no doubt that she'll graduate with honors and be accepted by the university of her choice. He just wishes she weren't so serious all the time.

He looks in on Randy. The ten-year-old boy is sound asleep. Little Randy, rough and tumble, in the boys soccer league this year. Always on the go, and so independent. Kyle knows he should spend more time with his son. But there's the restaurant, and now his work for the underground – all kinds of reasons why he can't. Why he doesn't.

In the kitchen Kyle pours some wine. He briefly accesses the observation room directly. The men are there. Marty's spirits seem to have risen a little. He tells them they're going to drink a good cabernet. They smile and say goodnight. Kyle signs off.

When Laura arrives they sit on the terrace. The night is still hot. "Who was that guy at the restaurant this afternoon?" she asks.



"The professor-looking sort?" Kyle says, aware that the men in the attic will know he's talking about Trevor. "Somebody trying to find out who we do business with. I sent him on his way," Kyle says.

"Good," says Laura.

Lies, thinks Kyle.

The next morning the news is bad too. Kyle is up at dawn. He'll soon leave for the restaurant, to open up for the employees, supervise deliveries and begin the lunch shift preparations. The newspaper has arrived and he quickly scans the headlines.

He draws in his breath as he reads, but his anger soon takes over. It appears, says one article, that enemies of the Republic, sought by the police, have gone into hiding within the minds of traitorous individuals. Bodies in cryonic sleep have been discovered and accomplices arrested. The minds of these enemies may still be at large.

Such drivel, Kyle thinks. But the minds are free. That much is true.

The editorials are alarming. The population is called upon to be vigilant, to identify and denounce anyone suspected of harboring the mind of an enemy. Then come lists of characteristics and behavioral quirks to look for.

The population? They must mean the mass movement that has brought us to dictatorship, Kyle rants silently. The human mass, he thinks. They can get that animal to do anything. But Kyle knows there is no point in spending energy on anger. You've got to be strong, or you don't get involved in underground activities in the first place.

He runs a shower and steps into the comfort of the warm water. As usual when he takes a shower, he accesses the observation room. At first he felt strange, knowing he was taking a shower with two other men, but it's an ideal time to converse. Laura and the children aren't up yet, and in the noise of the falling water Kyle can talk with David and Marty with no fear. He tries not to speak out loud, but sometimes he forgets himself.

It's important to let the men participate in daily rituals, Kyle knows. It helps them to organize their day, to stay on track and to feel that they're a part of normal existence. It's the closest thing to tactile sensations they have.

David likes to tease Kyle. "When are you going to let us in while you're making love with Laura?" he says now and again. Marty is too reserved to joke like this, but he always laughs along.

This morning no one feels like laughing.

Kyle sums up the news for them. The advice to the population is worrying, he says. Be on the lookout for traitors hiding enemies. Absent looks, or looks of intense focus, distraction, talking to oneself, frequent fatigue or headaches, secretiveness.

He'll have to be especially careful, even at home. He thinks of all the people he sees daily. Laura and the children, the neighbors, and the employees and customers at the restaurant. Their friends, too, though they don't see them much anymore. Their parents and their other relatives whom they only see a few times a year.

Marty is depressed this morning. He's certain that it's the discovery of his body that has led to these articles. But Marty is good. He's concerned for Laura, Yolanda and Randy. "Surely you don't have to put up a front for them, Kyle?" he asks.

Kyle hesitates before answering. No, he says, though he thinks that he should take care for Yolanda, with the things they tell the young people in the schools these days. Who knew what kind of

Why did he agree to hide anyone? It's for freedom, he has told himself time and again

pressure she might feel? And she has to worry about getting into university next year.

After the shower David and Marty are still with Kyle. They have coffee and go over the newspaper again so the guys can read it first hand. They can't believe the events of the last few years. The president – the raving crazy as many call him – surely he can't last. Reasonable people will take things in hand, responsible government must return. It has to. But the years go by and the crazy is still there, re-elected. His faction shows no sign of relinquishing power.

Later that morning, with Marty and David on their own again, Kyle walks to work in the warm morning. He's very careful about crossing the street. You don't want to get run over by a bus, Trevor had warned. And try to stay in reasonably good health, too.

As he walks Kyle thinks about his work for the underground. Why did he agree to hide anyone? It's for freedom, he has told himself time and again. Real freedom. Not some blurry ideology, that myth that so many people speak of. Or is it because that raving crazy is just too offensive to tolerate? That guy will lead us to tragedy, Kyle has always thought. Hiding Marty and David is one small thing that a little person like Kyle can do.

Kyle arrives at the restaurant and looks at the newspaper again, a final glance over the front page. In all the excitement this morning, one story has escaped him. Only now does he notice it.

Carson Benney has disappeared.

It's evening now, and Kyle has seen Trevor again today. Late this afternoon, at the gym where they both work out three times a week. The usual time and place for them to meet. Kyle has known Trevor for years. They were friends at the gym long before the troubles began. There they don't need to be afraid of being seen together.

But they're still careful of what they say and of who might be listening.

Recently a new face appeared at the gym. Russ, a big strapping guy, with a square, tanned face, and reddish-blond hair. He's about Kyle's age, and does the same kind of workout Trevor and Kyle do. Abs, back, abs, shoulders, abs, biceps, and more abs. The exercise seems to do Russ a lot more good than it does Kyle, Kyle thinks. Russ smiles and talks a lot, obviously wants to be friends with Kyle and Trevor. But he's got a look in his eye, Kyle thinks. As if he's got a plan and is waiting to play it out. But Kyle catches himself whenever thoughts like this cross his mind. It may be only his imagination. This constant suspicion is killing.

Yet Russ always seems to know when he and Trevor will be there.

"A bike ride this weekend?" Trevor asks when Russ is out of ear-shot.

"Sunday morning," Kyle agrees. The restaurant is closed Sundays.

To talk seriously Kyle and Trevor take bike rides in the country. That's how Trevor first approached Kyle about the underground a few months back.

Kyle would be a good host, Trevor had said when he first leveled with him about his underground activities. Why? Because you're a small businessman, Kyle, not some big-mouthed intellectual. Nobody would suspect you. As for the download, well, we use only a small part of your brain. There's plenty of room up there. No danger at all.

Unless one day a sleeping body is found, Kyle now thinks.

They talked about the risks. What if he is caught, Kyle asked. Surely they can probe the brain, discover the hideout. Only if you're inside, or if you access the observation room during the probe, said Trevor. And you have a procedure to follow if you're ever arrested, things to say, or not. They would talk about it.

"And if worse comes to worst," Trevor said, "your guests have the red door. After that, look after yourself."

"But how will I know when and how to let them out?"

"You'll know," said Trevor. "And so will they."

At the time Kyle hadn't noticed Trevor's subtle use of the plural.

This evening Kyle and the children have dinner together, as usual. Randy finishes quickly and runs out to play with his friends in the warm twilight. He has a new buddy, Bobby McCord, newly arrived in town. Yolanda sits with Kyle a moment. Yolanda, dark and beautiful, like her mother, but tall like Kyle. He hopes she doesn't catch his waistline as she grows older. Kyle wants to talk to her about school, about going away to university next year, about anything, in fact, but he can't think of how to begin. She's become so distant.

He looks at her and feels a sudden chill. She has a look in her eye. That same suspicious look as Laura, Kyle thinks. Or is it that same look as Russ has? Does she have a plan? She has to think of her future, Kyle knows. He feels sick at himself for being so suspicious.

"You look so troubled these days, Daddy," Yolanda says.

"Troubled?" Kyle says and tries to smile. He thinks he succeeds in looking surprised, and interested.

"You're so quiet. Last night at dinner, and tonight too. Is everything okay at the restaurant?"

"Fine, I'm just tired," he says. "I'll take a nap after dinner."

With Yolanda gone to her room Kyle slips into the bedroom and turns on the television. He's soon inside the attic, in the living room where he tells David and Marty about Trevor's request for a meeting. He hopes this will reassure Marty. Perhaps Trevor will have some news by then. Marty still looks worried, though. Kyle wishes he could stay longer. The attic is peaceful, the company of Marty and David pleasant.

Now Kyle's coming out. He's on the bed, the noise of the television in the background. Yolanda is standing over him.

"Are you sure you're all right, Daddy?" she says.
 Kyle nods and smiles and does his best to appear groggy.
 "You're taking these evening naps more and more," she says.
 "Just so I can stay up with your mother when she gets home," he says.

"You look like you're in a trance when you sleep in the evening like this," Yolanda says. "As if something's bothering you."

That look in her eye. Kyle feels roasted under the scrutiny.

Later, when Laura gets home, she and Kyle sip wine on the terrace.

"A customer asked about you tonight," she says. "A guy named Russ."

"Oh," Kyle says. "Russ, from the gym." Kyle says this calmly, but his heartbeat quickens. So Russ knows where he works. "What did he want?"

"Just to say hi. Or so he said."

"What do you mean?"

"I got a strange feeling from him," Laura says.

"What kind of feeling?"

"You know," says Laura.

And she gives him another one of those looks.

Sunday morning comes and Kyle meets Trevor. They ride side by side on a small country road. The morning quickly grows hot.

"The men are listening," Kyle says. "So what about Marty?"

"The body is still in custody," Trevor says. "The police are stepping up operations, but I doubt this can lead to you."

But this isn't why Trevor wanted to see him.

"We need you to hide someone else," Trevor says.

Kyle feels a stab in the gut.

"Carson Benney?" he asks, though he's sure that's who it is.

Trevor nods.

"It'd be better to spread the risk around," Kyle says. "And when are you going to find a permanent place for Marty and David? I'm supposed to be only the half-way house. Remember? And first it was to be only Marty, and –"

"You're a good host," Trevor says. "They're hard to come by."

Kyle activates direct access. "Did you get all that?" he asks.

He hears them say yes. He feels Marty's disappointment and concern at the lack of news about his body. But Marty is attentive when Kyle asks them how they would feel about having a new roommate. Yeah, why not, says David. It'll be a kick having a famous politician around. Marty agrees, but Kyle senses that he's not happy. Marty doesn't much like politicians.

Kyle and Trevor stop at a crossroads and stand in the shade of a tree, sipping at their water bottles. Kyle agrees to hide Benney, though he's worried. He tells Trevor of his fears about Yolanda.

"Don't trust anyone," Trevor says. "We hear stories every day of denunciations by family members. Wives denounced by husbands, parents by children. It tears me apart."

It tears Kyle apart too. He can't believe that his wife or daughter would denounce him, but so much is at stake. The restaurant has been a huge investment. God, how hard they've worked. They're doing well, but it could all come apart in an instant. Yolanda needs to get into university next year. Pressure can be brought in so many ways.

Kyle and Trevor ride back to town by another road, making plans for the download on the way. The download is a dangerous phase since Kyle will have to go to Gill's house. The equipment is rare and expensive, usually to be found only in universities, or in the private labs of foundations or corporations. It may not be easy to find someone hiding in the mind of another person, but this equipment

is easy to locate. Trevor and Kyle decide on the following Tuesday afternoon. Yolanda has a dance lesson after school, and Randy his soccer practice. Kyle will have time alone. If Laura asks, he'll say he went to the gym.

It's Sunday evening now. Kyle and the family are having dinner together. He's barbecued some steaks, Laura has made a salad, and Yolanda has made a peach cobbler. Randy helps watch over the fire.

Kyle opens a bottle of an excellent syrah. Would Yolanda like a little? After all, he says, she's going to be eighteen this winter. Laura smiles, but Kyle can see that she's uneasy. Yolanda looks confused. Kyle pours her a half glass. She sniffs it, takes a sip and says it's good. But when the meal is over Kyle sees that she hasn't drunk it. She has homework to do, she says, and excuses herself.

"You shouldn't have given her the wine," says Laura. "What will people say if they find out? And what will she think, knowing her father has allowed her to drink? You know what attitudes are like these days."

"We can't let the events dictate everything we do," says Kyle.

"Do you know what happened to those people who were found hiding that body in their house?" Laura says. "They're in jail, and they've lost everything."

"To take such a risk," Kyle says, "they must have had very good reasons." He looks back at Laura. He tries to make it a suspicious



look, like one of those looks that she and Yolanda have given him – that he *thinks* they've given him, he tells himself. He is so fed up with this feeling of suspicion.

"What's wrong with you?" she says.

"Nothing that isn't wrong with the whole country," Kyle says. He knows he shouldn't provoke her like this. He'd like to talk to Laura, tell her how he feels, what he's been doing for the underground. But how would she react?

"Kyle," Laura says. "We've got the children to think about. And the restaurant too. It's our livelihood."

Kyle says nothing.

They make small talk as they clean up in the kitchen. Afterwards Laura sits down to read in the living room. Kyle sits alone on the terrace, sipping the rest of his wine, the observation room discreetly open. From where he sits he can see Laura through the window, in the glow of the reading lamp, her back to him.

How well does he really know her? he wonders.

It's late Tuesday evening now. The September heat wave continues. Kyle and the children have had dinner on the terrace again. The download went according to plan that afternoon. Trevor drove Kyle from Gill's house to the gym afterwards. Kyle had left his car there.

"How do you feel?" Trevor asked.

"Fine," Kyle said, but it was a lie. He felt tired. The previous times the download had left him feeling normal, but this was different. Carson's download was a heavy one. In addition to Carson, there was the new bedroom to create, and Carson's many contacts, resources and virtual belongings to include. Plus, the system was updated, and the apartment upgraded.

Now Kyle slowly climbs the stairs to the attic. He's still tired. Very tired. But he wants to pay the guys a visit anyway. He hasn't met Carson yet.

Carson looks just like his photos. Older than Kyle, and graying, but with only a hint of a waistline bulge. Kyle feels fat compared to him. And in his three piece suit, his tie and shiny black shoes, how different the he looks from Marty and David. David was always in jeans and a tee-shirt, Marty in old slacks and a worn-out sweater.

Amazing how the system can handle such detail, Kyle thinks.

The light in the apartment is different, Kyle notices. A sliding glass door has been added, looking out onto a flowered terrace with swimming pool. A high fence covered with vines surrounds the terrace. The view beyond is obscured by high trees, but Kyle thinks he sees a distant mountain landscape. There's a gate in the fence too. Another escape hatch?

"Nice, eh?" says David. "The daylight seems to be synchronized with the real day outside. And the temperature is perfect."

No wonder the download was difficult, thinks Kyle.

"We've got a kitchen too," adds Marty. "We can't cook, but we can order up virtual meals. That might help us stay on schedule."

"Too bad they didn't think of this earlier," Kyle says. But he doesn't like these changes. It's less and less like a temporary refuge up here.

Carson greets Kyle warmly. He is so grateful for the help, he says. Here inside he plans to continue his work of organizing a new opposition party, to give the country a third choice. Enough of this false democracy, enough of this useless two-party system. What we want is freedom. Real freedom, he says, his arms raised. We must be

The previous times the download had left him feeling normal, but this was different

ready for the next elections. The population will rise up and throw the scoundrels out.

Kyle looks at Marty and David. Marty rolls his eyes. David smirks. Carson is a brave man, thinks Kyle. He speaks brave words that have cost him dearly, and may yet cost him even more. But doesn't he realize that it's the 'population' that has put the scoundrels in power? That keeps them there?

Kyle must leave. Laura will be home soon. He leaves the men in the living room. Their voices carry down the hall as he goes out. An argument is in the making, thinks Kyle. He surfaces and walks down the hall, feigning grogginess as usual. Yolanda is there, with Randy by her side. They watch him as he walks.

"Are you okay, Daddy?" she asks.

"Fine," Kyle says. "Just tired. That's all."

Laura soon comes in. They sit on the terrace, sipping a chilled white.

"Russ was in looking for you today," she says. "Where were you?"

"At the gym," says Kyle, yawning.

"That's what Russ thought," she says. "Your car was out front. He went in, but didn't see you."

Kyle feels her dark eyes boring into him. He knows she won't let up. And he notices how she says 'Russ'. Not 'That Russ', or 'your friend Russ'. Just 'Russ'.

"Maybe I was in the sauna," Kyle says. "What did he want?"

"He mentioned a bike ride." She takes a long sip of her wine, then slowly puts down her glass. "Where were you, Kyle?" she says.

"At the gym."

"Why didn't Russ find you?"

"It sounds like you and Russ are good friends," Kyle says.

Laura says nothing.

"Or that he wanted an excuse to drop by the restaurant to see you," Kyle continues. "He drives about town looking for me, just to

ask about going for a bike ride - "

"He's new in town," Laura says. "He's just trying to make - "

"- and he ends up at the restaurant, chatting with you. Doesn't he have anything better to do? What *does* he do, by the way? He must have a job."

Laura slams her wine glass on the table. Wine spills over the sides and onto the table top. She stands. "Don't be silly," she says, turns away and goes into the house.

Kyle sits there for a long moment, softly massaging his temples. He feels a pressure in the top of his brain.

.....
Kyle wakes up late the next morning. And tired, so tired. He rushes to get to the restaurant. No time to access the attic and talk to the guys. No time to even take a shower or read the newspaper.

This fatigue is not normal. He needs to see Trevor.

The restaurant is empty, but in the back rooms the kitchen staff is clanging pots and pans, the radio blaring pop tunes. Kyle sits at a bar room table facing the front door, a cup of coffee and order forms before him. He must check the day's deliveries, a hard job, as tired and worried as he feels. He lays his head down on the table.

The sudden sound of the door opening jars him. He looks up.

Trevor is coming towards him, his face pale and contorted. "Gill's been arrested, Kyle," he whispers.

Kyle says nothing. Why has Trevor come here to tell him this? He should know better. The kitchen staff, deliverymen, any number of people could come in and see him. Get him out of here, thinks Kyle. Fast.

"Let's go to the bakery next door and have a pastry," he says.

"No time," says Trevor, panting, backing away. "I'll try to learn more today. Meet me at the gym this afternoon, as usual."

"I'm not well, Trevor. Something's wrong, the download - " But Trevor is gone.

That afternoon Kyle leaves the restaurant early. At the gym he goes into the exercise room in his street clothes, into the clamor of pounding weights, humming chains, and soft rock from overhead loudspeakers. He'll only stay a moment, just long enough to speak with Trevor. He's too tired for exercise. He looks out over the crowd on their exercise machines, but sees no Trevor.

Someone taps him on the shoulder.

"Hey, Kyle," says Russ with a big smile. "How's it going?"

"Fine," says Kyle. He manages a smile too. He should give Russ a few minutes, not to arouse his suspicion.

"Your wife tell you I stopped by?" Russ says. He doesn't wait for Kyle's answer. How would Kyle like to join a Sunday morning biking club? Hey, Kyle, he quickly adds, you're looking pretty tired. Anything wrong?

"Just overworked," Kyle says, and excuses himself. He's got to run home, he says. Thanks for the invitation. He'll be in touch.

Kyle wanders through the gym. He feels a headache coming on. A drumming in the top of his head, like the pounding of these weights. He finds Trevor nowhere. Over his shoulder he sees Russ looking at him.

Kyle waves to Russ as he's about to leave.

Russ rushes to him, takes him by the arm.

"You sure you're okay, Kyle?" he says, his voice low and sure. He puts his hand on Kyle's forehead. "No fever, but you don't look well. If anything's wrong, maybe I can help."

"Things are fine, Russ," Kyle says.

.....
Kyle arrives home, a cold sweat pouring down his face. He needs to sleep. But first he wants to go up to the attic to tell the guys the news

of Gill and his fears for Trevor. He wants to tell them this in person. They're the only people he can share this with.

In the attic he finds the men on the terrace. The afternoon sun is still high. David is swimming laps in the pool, Marty is sitting in a deck chair scribbling notes in the margins of a print-out of his new novel, and Carson is at the picnic table typing on his laptop.

"Kyle, come on in," cries David. "The water's great."

Kyle smiles but declines. He sits at the picnic table to talk with Carson. He wishes he had time to get to know him better. That will have to wait.

"Kyle," Carson says, loud and confident as he shuts down his laptop, "I'll need to get into the control room tomorrow, all day. There's a secret meeting in the capital I have to attend."

Kyle feels a tightening in his stomach, then tiny tremors. He didn't need this. Not now. He glances at Marty who has overheard. Marty looks worried, comes to join them at the table.

"Carson," says Kyle, "I have some news for all of you."

"Maybe you didn't hear me," says Carson.

"I heard you," says Kyle. "That's against the rules. Listen, we -"

"This is more important than the rules," says Carson.

"For you it is," says Marty. "Not for us!"

"This meeting is crucial," Carson continues.

David joins them now, his hair and trunks dripping. "Hey Kyle," he says, toweling himself off.

"Listen, Marty," says Carson. "You have to understand that -"

"Carson," Kyle says. "No one is going into the control room."

"We should be using all the means at our disposal," says Carson, nearly spitting out the words, "if we're serious about our cause."

Kyle winces at Carson's tone, so contemptuous. He stands to go. "A lot of people have taken a risk to protect you, Carson," he says. "Be worthy."

"Protection?" Carson yells after Kyle. "What we need is action!"

"Carson, shut up," David is saying as Kyle leaves the terrace.

Kyle won't take crap from Carson Benney. He just won't. He'll come back later to tell them about Gill and Trevor.

Kyle surfaces. He starts on seeing Randy's face hovering above him, and quickly pushes himself upright. Randy jumps back. Randy's friend Bobby McCord is standing at the bedroom door. The boy springs backwards, his squarish face white in the darkened hallway.

"Randy," Kyle says, "what are you doing here?"

"Can I go over to Bobby's house for a while?" Randy asks.

It's just past four, Kyle sees. "Okay," he says, "but only for an hour."

In the kitchen Kyle starts making dinner, wishing he didn't have to. What to make? Pasta and salad? Yes, but he feels his headache coming back. He spills water over the stove, then refills the pan. The water begins to heat, he pours in a few drops of olive oil, but his hand shakes and the few drops become several tablespoons. He can't steady his hand. Maybe a glass of wine would help. He fumbles with the bottle, drops the corkscrew, retrieves it, but only to push the cork down into the wine. The pounding inside his head grows. The bottle crashes to the floor, wine gurgles out around the cork in frothy red spurts.

Kyle scrambles to wipe up the wine with his bare hands. But that's no good, he thinks. He reaches for a sponge, but his skull feels as if it's about to split open. He sinks to his knees, holding his head in his hands.

"Daddy!" Yolanda rushes into the kitchen. She sets the wine bottle aright. Now Kyle feels her wiping the wine off his face and hands.

Kyle stands, leans against the kitchen counter, the pounding lessens, becomes faint and dull. He should go lie down. Randy is in the

kitchen now too. Home already from Bobby McCord's? What time is it? Not five yet.

Why won't this pounding go away?

Kyle is walking down the hall to the bedroom now, Randy leading him by the hand. He hears Yolanda back in the kitchen. She'll clean up, get dinner ready. He knows he can count on her.

"Randy, you're home so soon," mumbles Kyle as he lies down.

"I didn't go," says Randy. "You scared Bobby. You were weird."

Yes, Kyle thinks. I am weird. Very weird. And very tired.

He shuts his eyes.

Kyle feels better now. He's sitting on the terrace with Randy and Yolanda. He slept for an hour while Yolanda got dinner ready - tortellini in a mushroom and sage sauce, plus a tossed salad. Some wine remains in the bottle, but he doesn't want any. And the evening is hot, still so hot. When will autumn bring cooler temperatures? The meal is over now, but the children remain at the table with him. Kyle tries to talk to them, but they don't say much. He'll clear the table and do the dishes instead.

"We'll do it," says Randy.

"You go lie down," says Yolanda.

Kyle is relieved. He wants to go up to the attic. He must find out what has happened up there. And he still hasn't told the men about Trevor.



The attic is silent as Kyle makes his way through the hallway. David's door is open, but the reporter isn't there. Next is Marty's door. Kyle listens, hears the faint tapping of a computer keyboard, a good sign. But it's Carson that Kyle wants to see.

Carson's door is tightly shut. No answer to Kyle's knocking.

Kyle finds David on a chaise longue on the terrace. The reporter's face looks different. A black eye, Kyle sees.

"We had a bit of a dust up," says David.

"I figured," says Kyle. He sits near David and looks about the terrace. A deck chair is overturned, some of Marty's papers strewn about.

"Carson was picking on Marty," David continues. "The guy got really nasty. I thought he was going to hit Marty. I stepped in and Carson took a swing at me, caught me in the eye." David sighed and smiled. "I had to do something about it," he adds.

Kyle smiles too. "How's Carson?"

"I think that was the first time anybody's ever put him in his place."

"You okay, David?" asks Kyle.

"It's only virtual," says the reporter.

Kyle hears someone coming. Carson emerges through the sliding glass doors from the living room. He has a black eye too, and his nose has been bleeding. Marty follows, carrying another manuscript.

"I thought I heard you out here," says Carson. "Thought you'd sneak back, did you?"

"Don't start in again, Carson," says David.

"I've contacted the underground," Carson says. "I want out of here."

"I want you out of here too," says Kyle. He stands. He has to do something about Carson. He's the host. It's his job. Not David and Marty's. But who can he contact? Trevor was his only link.

Kyle feels the terrace shaking beneath his feet. His own internal tremors, he wonders? No, it's like an earthquake that stops then

starts again, then stops. Kyle looks about him. The men look as mystified as he is.

The earthquake starts again, violent this time.

Kyle's headache comes roaring back. Feverish this time, as if two burning hands were trying to pull his brain out of his head. A hot wind rises. Trees and bushes shake, the water in the pool splashes over the sides and onto the tiles. Chairs fall over. The glass doors rattle. David grabs Marty and pulls him into the apartment.

The wind becomes a long 'aaaaaaa'. "Daaaaaaa – " it howls.

Kyle runs for the hallway, the door, and the long stairway beyond. He suddenly understands what's happening. He must hurry.

The bedroom appears. Yolanda is shaking him.

"Daddy, wake up," she pleads. "Mom's just come home, and there are two policemen at the door to see you."

Kyle jerks himself up off the bed, wavers down the hall to the front door. Laura is there holding the door ajar.

She says nothing, but her eyes are wide, her lower lip trembling.

Laura comes home, Kyle thinks, and suddenly the police arrive. He opens the door. Two officers look back at him.

"Mr Kyle Barrett? You're wanted for questioning," one of them says calmly. The policeman is of medium height. That's all that Kyle sees of him.

"For what?" he asks.

"A problem that concerns you," the officer says.

The blow comes – a violent push – and Kyle falls flat on the hard tile floor, face down

No point in arguing, and useless to ask for more information. Kyle knows he simply must go. He quickly packs a bag with his toothbrush and a change of underwear. As he goes out the door, Kyle turns around to look at Laura. Yolanda huddles at her mother's side.

"Where are you taking him?" Laura screams at the policemen. Her voice rips the air.

Kyle reaches for her, grasps her hand.

"You'll be informed in due time," says the officer.

.....
The air-conditioned police car moves through the streets. These tree-lined streets, these houses, full of normal people living normal lives, Kyle thinks. But he knows that isn't true. No one lives a normal life anymore.

He tries to listen to the attic. No tapping, no headache. His fatigue seems to have fallen away. That's good. He'll need all his strength for what is to come. Should he access the observation room? Tell the guys what is happening? No. They'll suspect it anyway after the way he rushed out.

The ride to the police station is short. Now Kyle's in a cool back room with white walls and travel posters of majestic mountain scenes. Please sit down and wait, one of his officers tells him, and points to a rickety metal folding chair in the middle of the room. His officers, Kyle thinks, the ones who brought him here. They look back at him.

They are both of medium height, Kyle sees. And of medium build, with medium faces. And medium voices that calmly tell him what to do. He thinks of that medium voice that said, "You'll be informed in due time."

Behind Kyle a door opens. His officers look up.

Kyle wants to see the newcomer too. He turns, glimpses two men in plain clothes, one of them already very close to him, his arms raised, holding something above Kyle's head.

Now Kyle sees nothing more. Rough cloth is pulled over his head, scraping down across his forehead and nose.

The blow comes – a violent push – and Kyle falls flat on the hard tile floor, face down. The wind is knocked out of him. He tries to scream, but a searing pain is all that comes up from his chest. His face, shoulders and arms feel cold and numb. He feels his bladder begin to give way, but before the urine runs, he flexes his muscles. He won't let that happen, won't shame himself. The flow doesn't come.

He's got to be strong, he thinks. He's got to protect the men in the attic. He knows what to expect. He and Trevor have talked about arrest many times.

Kyle's arms and legs are jerked about. Handcuffs and shackles are tight around his wrists and ankles now, the hood tight around his neck. Tight, tight, tight, until he can hardly breathe. Are they going to strangle him? Here and now? Already?

"Come on, get up," says a gravelly voice, a man's voice, but not one of his officers. "You've got an appointment to keep."

Rough hands grip his arms, drag him to his feet.

"Walk," says the gravelly voice, and the hands push him along.

The hood and cord chafe and burn. The handcuffs and shackles cut, but Kyle moves quickly outside into the heat. The hands that pushed him now lift him. He's in a vehicle again, pushed to the far end of a hard bench. It's a van this time from the sound of the idling motor. Someone takes the seat next to Kyle. Through his hood Kyle can smell the man's aftershave, sharp and sweet.

The engine revs and the van turns sharply into the street.

Kyle imagines the same dark streets he rode through only moments before. The van turns and turns again, and Kyle soon has no idea where he is. He might as well put this time to use. He may not get another chance at direct access. He holds his head straight.

Marty, David and Carson are all there. They all speak at once, their voices a blasting mixture of fear, rage and bluster. What's going on? Ow, that hurts. I've been afraid of this all along. Shit, where the hell are they taking you? Taking us, Marty points out. Careful not to speak out loud, Kyle runs the day's events by them all. Trevor's panicked visit to the restaurant this morning. Gill's arrest, Trevor's no show at the gym, and Russ, Russ with his low voice offering help. Hang in there, Kyle, says David, don't let the bastards intimidate you. Let me have a go at them, Kyle, Carson now says. Let me into the control room and I'll give them a run for their money.

"No," mumbles Kyle aloud in the noise and excitement, "I'm the one who –"

"Shut up," says the aftershave man next to Kyle.

Kyle feels a sharp jab in the ribs. A club of some sort. Ow, says Carson, and the noise inside Kyle's head stops. He breaks the connection.

We're in deep trouble, Kyle thinks.

.....
It must be early morning, maybe five or so. Kyle crouches in a cage, shivering in his blue canvas jumpsuit. They brought him here last night after a long drive. Kyle couldn't say how long. Just long. They stripped him and gave him this jumpsuit, but nothing to wear underneath. The rough material and seams chafe his skin. Then they made him walk in a circle, for hours, and the plastic sandals they gave him cut his feet raw. He asked permission to go to the toilet, but they told him to keep walking.

He finally peed in his suit and it ran down onto the floor.

"Look what you're doing to my floor," barked the aftershave man, and he beat Kyle several times on the back with a club.

Kyle looked at the guard. Aftershave, he had started calling

him. The other one, the gravelly voiced one had gone by then. Off duty perhaps? Kyle had seen both their faces by then. He couldn't describe them, except that there was nothing medium about them. Aftershave hooded him again, threw him in this cage and turned out the light. Kyle fumbled about, exploring. The cage isn't more than a few square meters – he can't stand up without bumping his head on the wire mesh ceiling – a plank for a bed, and a bucket in the corner. But he can't use the bucket. He's still handcuffed, behind his back. And by the time they put him here his ankles were so sore from the shackles that he crouched on this plank and hasn't moved since.

Kyle shivers, and his breath is short. He tries to sleep but when he shuts his eyes he feels propelled through the air, as if he were flying. He'd like to stretch out his arms, pretend to flap them like wings, feel as though he had some control over this flight, but he's handcuffed. He looks down to get his bearings, but the ground is so far below that he can't see a thing.

And he wonders about how he ended up here. Who denounced him? Someone surely pointed a finger. You don't end up here any other way. He'd been careful. He certainly hadn't walked around town with a sign that said *Enemy of freedom. Come and get me.*

No. Somebody has been watching him, Kyle thinks. Somebody suspected him, somebody who could get close to him.

He thinks he knows who.

Beyond Kyle's hood a brightness explodes, strong and white. The lights have come on. A door slams with a heavy metallic bang that echoes through this warehouse-like building.

"Good morning," yells a voice. It's that gravelly voice from last night.

Gravelly Voice and Aftershave, apparently they're his new officers. Other presences, other pairs of rough arms and hands, come and go, lending a helping hand. They say nothing. But Gravelly Voice and Aftershave, they're his. Kyle hasn't heard Gravelly all night, but Aftershave seems to have been here all the time. Now Gravelly is back, his voice booming through the building.

Morning? But they only turned out the lights a short time ago. He can't be sure what time it is anyway. He can't be sure of anything.

Morning. Laura will have to get up soon, go in to the restaurant in his place, get the day under way. Kyle still hears her voice as she screamed last night, "Where are you taking him?" Laura, with Yolanda huddled at her side. Funny how Yolanda seemed to huddle. She's so tall, like her dad. But there she was, by her mother's side, huddling. Her mother, so petite. Kyle thinks of Randy too, already in bed last night when the police came. Did he wake up?

But it's Laura who's on Kyle's mind the most. Her voice, how it had torn into his head, into his heart. *Where are you taking him?* He had an appointment to keep, Kyle would like to tell her now. Something that concerns him. Him! Not her, not the children. He's sorry if he's put them in danger. But he had to do it.

Should he attempt a quick contact in the observation room? He listens to the attic, but feels nothing. In his mind he sees the faces of each of the men as the apartment shook and shuddered. An earthquake, he thinks. The big one that has finally struck.

Kyle hears footsteps now, thick hard soles on a cement floor, coming towards his cage.

"Breakfast time," says Gravelly Voice. The guard comes into the cage and tears off Kyle's hood.

Kyle doesn't feel hungry, but he'd like some water. Keep yourself hydrated, Trevor had told him. It helps against hunger. They won't give you much to eat.

It must be afternoon now. The heat is stifling. Kyle lies on his wooden plank. His sweat adds to the smell of urine. He thinks he may have slept for a while, but he can't be sure. His fear has settled into a gnawing, burrowing feeling in his gut. Be strong, he tells himself once again. Stronger than them.

Breakfast was cornflakes and weak lukewarm coffee. The flakes floated in warm milk nearly gone off, that now curdles in Kyle's stomach. What little he got of it. Gravelly Voice held the paper cup to his mouth and tried to pour the stuff down his throat. Most of it ran down his chest, beneath his jumpsuit. "Oops, sorry bud," said Gravelly Voice. The coffee, too, went mostly down Kyle's chest, joining the milk and soggy cornflakes in his crotch. (Yes, there's a little coffee tinge to his stink too.) But Gravelly Voice took greater care with the water. Kyle drank long. As much as he could.

"Now," said Gravelly Voice, "come out for a little walk."

And Kyle again walked in circles in front of his cage. For hours.

When the guard put him back in, he took off Kyle's handcuffs. Kyle used the bucket, then lay down again. He lies there still, the taste of curdled milk in his mouth, the odor from the bucket lingering in the air.

Kyle jerks his head upright. It's suddenly dark. He thinks he must have slept. So is it night? With no lunch or dinner? No interrogation yet? No, it would be too early for that. They let you live in dread for a while, Trevor had told him, for days even, to let you imagine all



the things they might do to you, let the terror build up inside you. They let you build it up yourself.

In the dark Kyle wants to try to sleep again. But he should contact the attic first. It's dangerous, but he owes the men an update.

They're waiting for him in the observation room. Wow, says David. Marty says nothing, but Kyle can imagine him shaking his head. Carson begins to say something but he coughs and sputters. The effect of the pain and the smell, maybe? Carson leaves the room. Kyle decides to go up there and see the guys himself.

On his plank Kyle lies back and shuts his eyes.

The apartment hallway is cool and comfortable. The pain in his wrists and ankles, the blisters on his feet, don't seem to hurt so much. But he's wearing his jumpsuit here too, and the stink follows him.

David and Marty are there. They take Kyle out onto the terrace and sit him down in the warm night air. Marty wipes his forehead with a wet cloth.

It is indeed night. Kyle can't stay long, he knows. He should sleep, as long as the guards let him. He looks at Marty and David sitting opposite him on the deck chairs. Carson comes out of the apartment now. He stands near the door, his hands in his pockets. No one says anything.

Kyle smiles. He can't think of anything to say either, except goodbye. Because this is goodbye. He feels it. He looks at the gate in the back fence, thinks of the red door. Soon he will have to figure out how to open them. Where will the guys go? Has the underground thought of that?

The sharp odor of aftershave hits Kyle, stinging his nose. The night sky explodes in a burst of white light and a metallic screech. His headache returns, like a tidal wave, but hot, like boiling water washing over him. The wind rises and the house shakes. Kyle runs for the stairs.

"Dinner time," says Aftershave as he yanks Kyle upright. "You have to be in shape tomorrow to see the inspector."

Kyle looks at the plate of cold macaroni and chunks of spam thrust at him. He isn't hungry, though he knows his body needs food. He begins to eat. Slowly. With bare hands.

Not fast enough for Aftershave. The guard starts feeding him with his own bare hands. One handful, another, and another and another. All of it, says Aftershave. Down it all goes. Whole.

"A little dessert now," says Aftershave. The guard holds a paper cup to Kyle's lips, tilted up. Way up. Sweetened apple sauce flows into his mouth and nostrils, down his chin and neck.

"My, my," says Aftershave, "for a restaurant owner your table manners are pretty bad. What would Inspector M say?"

M, thinks Kyle. The name sounds as if it came from some dumb spy novel. Inspector M? Of course it's M, Kyle realizes. He is now sure that he knows who denounced him.

But dinner isn't over yet. It's a dry cracker that Aftershave is forcing down Kyle's throat now. Coarse on his gums and tongue, and thick as it goes down. All of it, Aftershave orders. Kyle gags. Chew, yells Aftershave. No crumbs, you slob. Swallow. Followed by cold water. Kyle drinks willingly. At least a liter.

"A little after-dinner exercise?" says Aftershave, dragging Kyle out of the cage. "Walk!" the guard orders, shaking his club.

Kyle walks, but not for hours. For minutes only before Aftershave

In the dark Kyle wants to try to sleep again. But he should contact the attic first

begins yelling.

"Run."

And a few minutes later: "Down. It's time for some push ups."

Kyle begins. Up and down. Up and down. Along with the stinging of his wrists and ankles, now come cramps in his stomach. Four, five, six...

"Ass down," yells Aftershave.

A hard whack from the club lands square on Kyle's butt.

...seven, eight...

"Lower," yells the guard.

Kyle takes another blow from the club, across his back this time. And another and another.

He's down on his stomach now, rolls over on his side, draws his knees up to his chest. He doesn't even try to cry out.

The blows keep falling. Kyle covers his head with his arms.

Out, out. Tears burn Kyle's face. Up and out come the macaroni and spam, the applesauce and all the rest, in a pool next to Kyle's face.

Out, out, out, Kyle cries silently into his head. The red door. The back gate. Open. Out. Get out. Marty, David, Carson, get out. Out before it's too late. Out before they do this to you too. Run.

"Aw, not feeling so good," says the guard.

And the blows on Kyle's back keep coming.

Out, out. Laura, Yolanda, Randy. Out. Out of my life, before I bring this on you too. Go. The restaurant, Laura, it's yours now. You'll need it to support the children. I hope they let you keep it. And Yolanda, you'll get into university, I know, and you'll have a brilliant career. You don't need me. Randy too, you'll do just fine, son. You see, Randy, I'm in deep trouble. But try to understand what people do. And why they do it.

The blows continue.

Kyle wakes, lying face down on his plank. The building is dark and silent. His back feels like a single burning and bleeding welt. He doesn't remember being brought back into his cage.

He tries to listen to the attic. Not a sound. He accesses the observation room, but finds it empty. He waits a moment. Maybe someone's still up there, though he hopes not. A moment goes by, but he feels no sign of anyone. He'll go up and see for himself.

The apartment looks much the same, and the air feels fresh and cool. The bedroom doors are all open, the living room, the terrace and swimming pool – nothing unusual. Peaceful. Nobody there at all.

Kyle takes off his shackles. They come off easily. How so? Of course, up here they're only virtual. He brought them with him. Why didn't he think to do that on his previous visit?

The only difference in the apartment is the red door. It stands ajar at the end of its hallway. Kyle feels a draft coming.

He pulls the door fully open. It leads to a porch, he sees, and beyond that to someone's front garden, with an ordinary city street in the distance. Dawn is breaking and Kyle sees cars moving, hears the sounds of a town waking up. A normal town? With normal people living normal lives? All virtual? Were the men given an address to go to? A backup haven?

On the terrace Kyle sees the back gate. Shut. Perhaps they didn't go out this way. It opens easily. The sun has risen further now, but the morning light is still gray. The air is cool, but the day will be warm.

Kyle follows a forest path that winds down a brushy slope, with pines and birches and poplars all about. A small lake appears at the foot of a mountain.

Kyle sheds his putrid jumpsuit and steps into the cool water. At first it stings his chafed and bleeding ankles, but soon feels soothing. He falls forward and breaks into a crawl. Far out from the shore he swims, letting the water move swiftly over him, carrying away the stink of sweat, urine and curdled milk. In the middle of the lake, in way over his depth, he treads the water. The movement of his arms and legs feels good. He turns over and does a back stroke towards the shore.

Near the shore he can stand waist deep on the sandy lake bottom. He bends over, holds his head under water, and softly massages his temples, and then his scalp. Get all the dirt out of his hair, he thinks.

He'd like to stay here, maybe lie in the sun for a while. But Inspector M is expecting him. That has to be Inspector McCord. Russ McCord. Bobby's dad. Funny, but he'd never thought to ask Russ his last name.

How exactly did it happen? It doesn't matter. Kyle admits, those last few days he was weird and getting weirder. Bobby must have said something to his dad. Maybe Randy said something to Bobby. And if one day Randy realizes how his dad got arrested, he hopes the boy won't feel guilty. It wasn't your fault, Randy. This is bigger than all of us.

Kyle will come back here later today, he thinks. Back to the attic, back to this lake. Soon this is where he'll live.

But right now he has an appointment to keep. ☼

John is a US ex-pat who has lived in France for the last thirty years, where he teaches English in a university language centre. He's a graduate of Clarion West and has taken part in numerous other writing groups and workshops, and has had a story published in IASFM. John loves his day job and is fascinated by languages and the problems involved in learning them. He loves history too and following international events; and he loves speculative fiction: writing it allows him to explore the world.

VerV's reality fetish stretched to real live meetings with real live people in a real live physical office. Frank Deppo supposed it made sense. It was, as their brags whispered, *The first day of the best of your life*. But braving the surly automated buses of the San Fernando Valley, Inc. wasn't anything he wanted to do again. The deep-fried stink of biodiesel didn't cover the odor of the dirty mallstealers and blank-eyed brainhive-members. Frank ignored their envious looks as he stepped off the bus outside VerV's retro-cubilinear tower.

Sorry, guys, he thought. *Burn ten years of your life, and maybe you can do the same.*

Inside, VerV was decorated with carefully-faded reproductions of 100-year-old movie and television stills – *It's a Wonderful Life*, *Leave it to Beaver*, *Father Knows Best* – all broadcasting contextually to Frank's whisperpod and monocle about how they represented the VerV corporate spirit. Underneath the stills, the activewalls glowed with scenes from VerV's newest communities, randomly selected by the delisliced editor that created VerV's advertising: sunrise over the San Gabriel Enclave, painting the sleek neo-midcentury homes in shades of fire; a young father pushing his freckle-faced, golden-haired daughter higher and higher on a cheerful pastel-colored swingset; a lazy family stretched out in the greenbelt, reaching hands to point at slow meteors of spacejunk dropping from orbit; a beautiful woman in an open-collared business suit, reading to her son who lay wrapped in whipped-cream covers; a sharp-dressed man driving a shiny red DCX Dart through windswept engineered weeping willows.

Below the displays, a young woman with purple-tinted hair scrolled through a bragscreen, her face puckered into a dramatic frown. Three LifeStylists stood behind her, shrugging and exchanging eyes-rolled glances. One held crumpled sketches on real paper. Frank caught glimpses of a huge Tudor overlooking a lake, with a husband and a servant and a small purple-haired child playing with a dog. His whisperpod and monocle spilled data on the three LifeStylists, none on the purple-haired girl.

She can't be out of her teens, Frank thought. *An IP kid. Or one of those freak brains, grown on the sly.*

Suddenly Frank's ten-year indenture seemed like a gigantic weight, pulling him towards the undiscovered spaces of middle age. Still, he was going to get a life before 30. That was something.

"Mr Deppo?" a voice said, behind him.

Frank whirled. The voice belonged to a tall blonde woman, wrapped in a hermetically tailored maroon suit. She smiled and held out a hand. Green eyes, brilliant, fixed him.

Janit Peres, his whisperpods said. Frank's monocle scrolled public data, but Frank blinked it away.

"I'm Frank," Frank said, taking her hand.

She held his hand a little too long, smiled a little too widely. "Welcome to VerV, Mr Deppo. I'm Janit Peres. I'll be your LifeStylist."

Frank shivered. *This is it. This is the first day of the best of your life.* Visions of lazy afternoons spent under a shade-tree, holding a glass of sipping tequila, came unbidden. Images of his beautiful dark-haired wife, wrapped in silk sheets...

"Mr Deppo?" Janit said.

"Oh! Sorry. It's just. Um. Well, it's real exciting to be here. To be getting a life."

Janit offered him a warm smile. "I understand."

Frank smiled back at her, feeling a surge of overwhelming gratitude. She understood. It was OK. He normally didn't like tall, aggressive blondes, but this one was OK.

"What now?" Frank said.

"We find an office, run through the preliminary lifesketch I've done, make some tweaks. Then, maybe head over to the Valley Overview Villas, and take a look at where you might live."

This was it. This was what he'd been working for.

Still, he couldn't help looking back at the purple-haired girl and asking, "What's her problem?"

Janit pursed her lips. "She's a difficult client."

"IP kid?"

Janit just smiled. "Shall we find an office?"

THE BEST OF YOUR LIFE BY JASON STODDARD

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Frank lingered a moment more. He saw himself walking up to the purple-haired girl, pushing aside the LifeStylists, and asking her to run off and build a natural life together with him, just like they did in the old days.

The vision passed, leaving him with only one nagging question. *Why does she get three LifeStylists and I get only one?*

He shook his head. It didn't matter. He had a good LifeStylist. He could feel it.

Janit's office was an efficient little cubicle set up against a massive glass wall that overlooked the sprawling farms of the reclaimed San Fernando Valley. Green-yellow hotplants cooked under layers of translucent polymer, near-boiling in solar heat from Fresnel concentrators. Farther-off, the heat bred mirages, making it look as if the entire south end of the Valley was submerged beneath a brilliant lake.

On Janit's desk was a inexpensive tea service, brewing what smelled like a credible Darjeeling.

Tea, not coffee. Of course. Janit knew him. It was her job.

"What do you know about VerV?" Janit said, pouring the tea.

"Anyone can have a life, but only a select few can have a life with VerV."

Janit groaned. "That's so old."

"Lives without Vs are lies."

"That's worse! Where did you find that one?"

"It's from the twenties. Before you switched to reality advertising."

"Ug. That's one that I wish we could purge off the global net. We've come a long way. Do you know why you're here, Mr Deppo?"

"I think so."

"Because there's no better life," Janit said, waving a hand. Frank's monocle lit with data and charts, complex 3-D and 4-D diagrams like the topography of a dream-world. "We've combined the best loyalty discounts from homebuilders, companion tuners, appliance manufacturers, luxury food providers, land-leaseholders, blank and refurb providers, minerals-rights-groups, automakers, intelligence providers, comm groups, pet remediators, and a dozen or two that I can't remember off the top of my head. Then we factor in reduced taxes from the USG and local corps, and dramatically lower environmental impact fees to create the base. Then leverage out your projected lifetime value, forward-dated to the probable end of your career. By investing in VerV, you're investing in a life you literally could not buy any other way. Any questions?"

"It seems complicated."

"It takes a class-two hivemind to manage our financial arrangements. It takes a class-one to do the projections of future value."

"What if I get laid off?"

"That's been factored in. You have time to find another job or another career."

"What if I don't before the time limit's up?"

Janit gave him another dazzling smile. Frank relaxed. Nothing could be wrong. Nothing could possibly be wrong.

Frank's monocle changed to imagery of a business-suited woman, sitting at a breakfast nook with a husband and wife. They talked in lighthearted tones, just below the level of his hearing.

"And of course, with every VerV life, you are assigned a LifeStylist. Like me. Every three months, we come in and make little adjustments. Different vacations. Different tune on your wife or husband. Little upgrades, if your career trajectory exceeds our projections. Changes to keep things always interesting, always real."

"What if I don't want a wife?" Frank asked.

Janit frowned. "Don't tell me you're sold on the Space-Age Bach-

elor Pad idea. That almost never works out."

"Why not?"

"Higher fees. You're not bringing a tuned person back into the greater society. This wipes out a lot of discounts. Sure, you could have a flashier car, but you'll be living in a condo at the edge of the development, maybe even above one of the shopping centers. And it's not like your other bachelors or bachelorettes are going to be interested in you. They're seriously antisocial, typically. And about 90% male. And it's not like any of the tuned are going to have affairs. So you're limited to fishing the skanks from outside the enclave. Which won't make you very popular."

"I heard there was this one programmer who changed the tunes on all the wives and husbands and had himself a bit of a bisexual spree."

Janit frowned. "Urban legend. Probably started by independents living outside the system."

"There are really good docs on the net."

The frown deepened. Janit's fingers plucked at her earrings. "If it happened, it wasn't VerV."

Frank nodded. It didn't matter. *Let it go*, he thought. *You don't want to antagonize your LifeStylist. She cares about you.*

Frank picked up his tea and sipped it, knowing that it was true, knowing that it was VerV. It was a reasonably good Darjeeling, nothing knockout but not crap either.

"Good choice," Frank said, nodding at the cup.

"It's my job to make good choices," Janit said. "Though I understand you work more with wines."

Frank felt a warm flush of pride. "Associate lifestyle beverage designer, Seagrams grape products division."

"I would have thought that designing wine is a pretty sewn-up field. You take the great vintages, make molecular maps, and run tankloads with biomachine processes."

Frank nodded. "Yes, but there are secondary and tertiary effects. Where was the molecular map taken? At the center of the barrel? Near the surface? How efficient is the scavenging of the biomachine waste? There are still people who can tell the difference. But the real opportunity isn't in copying vintages. The real opportunity is using our knowledgebase of what constitutes 'great' to create synthetics that are better than anything that could ever be grown in Napa or Bordeaux. We can do it. I just need to fine-tune the knowledgebase a bit, make some extrapolations...but I'm probably boring you."

Janit laughed. "Not really. But I understand you're a tequila man yourself."

"Mexico won't let us touch it. I'm sure there are some illicit copies, but they're damn proud of their tequila."

"But you could do better."

"Of course! Just like you do with lives, I can do with booze."

Janit laughed, and Frank joined her. For a moment he wondered if he could share his life with a woman like this, so tall, so bright, so aggressive. He shook his head.

"So, why don't we see some more of my choices?" Janit said.

"Yes, please."

Janit used the activewall to show Frank what seemed to be a very basic life. Small house near the wall of Valley Overlook Villas. Maybe a couple of hundred square feet of backyard. A small white Chevy, sensible and boring. Smiling simulated neighbors dressed in sensible clothes, driving sensible cars.

"Wait, wait," Frank said, his stomach suddenly churning. "This seems pretty, uh, well, plain."

"You didn't expect the mansion, the Mercedes and the friendship with the governor to start, did you?"

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SCIENCE

"Well, no, uh..."

A brittle smile. "Those may come later."

But there are no guarantees, Frank thought, shivering.

"What if I want a better car?"

Janit pursed her lips and adjusted some figures. Frank's house changed into a townhome, his car morphed into a new Mustang.

"Can't I spend a little more?"

"Frank, I thought I explained that."

"What?"

"VerV takes in all the interlocking discounts and your entire lifetime value. You *can't* spend more."

"Oh." Frank felt his stomach sink, like a lead weight in his gut. But this was the first day of the best of his life, and she was really trying to help...

"Can I keep going?" Janit said. "It gets a lot better."

Frank nodded, and the activewall changed again. This time, he was sitting on his front porch, sharing a glass of wine with a slender, dark-haired woman who looked up at him with quivering eyes full of love and admiration.

"Is that my wife?"

"Yes."

"Is that what she'd really look like?"

Janit glanced at her monacle. "If we act fast. She joined the to-be-tuned queue just yesterday, but there's already been several hundred views."

The scene zoomed in on her silky dark hair, her big amber eyes. Frank swallowed.

"Will she really love me?"

"One hundred percent certified, based on the best simulations and millions of uploads. She'll be tuned to you."

"Where did she come from?" Frank asked, still looking at the screen.

A shrug. "I don't know. Peoria or Mojave, who knows? Just another independent coming back into society. You're doing her a favor by taking her in."

Frank shivered, wondering what it took to put yourself up for tuning, what nightmares she must have suffered, what price she had paid.

Like ten years of your life, working hundred-hour weeks, living in the company dorms, not seeing sunlight for months at a time.

"I...I don't know," Frank said. Yes, this woman is great, she has my best interests in mind, his monacle told him she was top LifeStylist, four months in a row. But.

"I just wish I could afford a better life," he said. "Like you. I can only imagine what your life is like -"

Janit barked harsh laughter. She rolled her eyes. "Me? I'm an indenture. Just like you were. Six years to go. But I work with one of the top Senior LifeStylists, and my trajectory is near-vertical. I'll take care of you. That's the only thing you need to know."

And she was right. Why worry? He couldn't buy this life.

"What next?"

"Why don't we head out to Valley Overlook?" Janit said. "It's so hard to see what your life will be like when it's projected on a wall. Why don't we go and meet your new neighbors?"

Frank smiled and stood up. That was something he could wrap his mind around. Maybe it would be a lot better in the real.

"I'd like that," he said.

.....
The little DCX Micro pounded its way across the rutted boulevards of the reclaimed Valley, pulling envious glances at every bus stop. At a big crop processing center, the silver-suited plant-wrangers hung

from the fractionating towers and chased them with high-pitched catcalls. Frank remembered yelling out the window of his parents' disintegrating RV, as they braved the roads from free campground to free campground. He remembered one time, the blonde girl who looked at him in serene indifference as their polished silver Mercedes glided through traffic and disappeared. As if asking, *Why are you jealous?* As if challenging, *Why can't you do this?*

Frank wondered where his parents were. Probably in some independent community, waiting for their radical biotech to be defoliated by the corporates they stole it from. Probably still yelling out of the windows of that very same RV, just a little dirtier and rustier than he'd last seen it.

They climbed out of the San Fernando Valley and into the hills. Frank could see the far side of the Valley, where neat rows of homes and bright white walls marked some of VerV's other communities.

Soon they were at their own wall. Blinding white stucco rose fifteen feet above their heads, punctuated by faux stone showthroughs for texture. Cut into the stucco was the name of the development, Valley Overlook Villas, and a discrete VerV logo. A massive riveted sheet-iron gate blocked the road.

"We're going with a more Spanish theme on this development," Janit said, as the gate swung slowly inward. It revealed a sharp-cut new road and endless lots of golden earth, sprouting concrete and wood and aluminum.

"It's not built yet," Frank said.

"Not entirely. We're heading over to the developed side, though."

Frank frowned. He'd expected to see the entire sweep of his new community, from the quaint shopping centers to the mansions on the hill. But there had to be some advantage to starting early; maybe he could move up.

"This will be a great enclave," Janit said. "And it's only a few minutes commute to the design center you'll be working at."

"Where does everyone shop?" Frank said, as they passed raw foundations and stacks of cinderblock.

"We have a General Outlet set up, and a mid-tier shopping center almost complete."

"What if I don't like Spanish style?"

A momentary frown soured Janit's face. "Look. We could place you elsewhere, but your value works best in a newborhood."

"Yeah, but -"

"Plus, I really don't think you want to commute all the way across the Valley six days a week. We'd have to factor that into your car choice, too."

Frank shook his head. *Work with her. She knows best.*

But as they drove through the newborhood, he wondered. The streets were new, but long streaks of tan earth striped them dirty. Dust lay everywhere. And, as they got deeper into the development, the finished houses were tiny and plain, rough stucco shacks that looked even smaller than they had on the activewall.

They stopped near the towering wall. Little houses hugged the road on curving, claustrophobic streets. Some had grass and young new trees; some still had dirt. Landscapers worked quickly on one of the houses, unrolling bolts of lawn and placing faux boulders in strategically artistic locations. Frank squinted and tried to imagine what the neighborhood would look like when the trees had grown to overarch the road and block out some of the wall and sky, when it had lost some of its rawness. It could look good, he thought. But it would still be small.

"This is where I'd live?"

Janit shook her head and pointed to a low rise, where new homes rose from raw earth. Some were finished, some were still receiving

roofs and stucco.

Janit pointed to a small two-story on a corner. "You see that one, the goldenrod one?" She asked. "That's what I had selected for you."

Frank squinted at it. At least it was a corner lot. But it looked like it was pushed right up against the hill behind it. And what would they build there?

"How big is it?" he asked.

"Big enough," Janit said. "Hey, Bob."

Frank turned. A handsome, sun-burned man was pulling off gardening mitts. "Hey, Janit. Thought I'd come over and welcome the new guy." He stuck out a hand. "Bob Menendez," he said.

"Frank Deppo."

Bob blinked. "Like the astronaut? The one who started the moon thing?"

"Yeah. Parents were fans."

"Frank has lots of questions," Janit said.

Bob laughed. "Don't we all. But –"

There was a crash from Bob's yard where the boulders were being placed. Dayworkers swarmed around the truck.

"Crap," Bob said. "Better see what that is. Good meeting you, Mr Deppo."

Frank watched him leave. He seemed happy enough. "What does Bob do for a living?"

Janit stared at him. "Nothing. He's tuned. His wife works for Pfizer bioelectronics."

Data scrolled in Frank's monacle, details of his neighbors. Of course. He could have looked at that earlier. The new American credo. Everyone watches everyone else. And in observation, there is security. And truth.

"He seems so normal," Frank said.

"If you don't know who's who, you'd never guess."

Frank nodded. That was good. That meant his wife might actually be...real. He remembered whispers in the Seagram's dorm, late at night. *They aren't really real. Stepfords. Like robots.*

Frank and Janit walked the street and said hello to everyone who was outside. Frank didn't look at his monacle, and tried to guess who was tuned and who was natural. They all seemed to be very natural. Friendly, outgoing, personable. Three tuned and two naturals, probably a pretty average score for a Saturday. Some naturals still working.

"They seem happy," Frank said.

"Why shouldn't they be?"

Frank shrugged. "It just seems a little plain. Boring cars. Small houses. Little neighborhood."

"This is how you start, Frank."

"It just seems...like there should be more. Some excitement."

Janit laid her hand on his arm. "Frank, these lifestyles are patterned off the most stable part of our history – the middle of the last century. Of course it'll seem a little familiar, a little regimented. But you have to ask yourself: what kind of excitement do I really want? A war? Economic depression? How about a few car-bombings? Trust me. This is the best of all possible worlds. The best of your life."

Frank sighed. It was true. What did he expect? Riding through the midnight neighborhood on his unmuffled Harley, two mallstead hookers strapped to the back?

Janit's hand was warm on his arm. Frank smiled at her.

Frank's monacle flickered and went blank. His whisperpod gave a blurt of static and fell into smooth, blank silence.

"Reboot," Frank said.

Nothing.

Janit frowned and tapped at her monacle. She muttered commands

under her breath.

"What's happening?" Frank said.

"I don't know."

"My comm is gone."

"So is mine. Hold on. I'm trying," Janit mumbled more commands and swung the monacle over in front of her eye to eyetype mode. Frank did the same, but none of his commands did anything. Tell-tales glowed green, but his screen was blank.

"Shit," Janit said. "All I've got is local processing. No comm."

From the house opposite them came voices, raised shrill in argument. There was a thump and a clatter.

"Come on," Janit said. "Let's get out of here."

The big riveted sheet-iron gate was closed. Janit slowed, frowned, and mumbled into her whisperpod. The gate remained closed.

"What's wrong?" Frank asked.

"I don't know. It should open. Automatically."

"Isn't there an emergency switch or something?" Frank said. He'd been nervous and on-edge since hearing the couple arguing in the house, thinking, *This could happen to me, this is happening to me, it's this woman, it's her fault, why didn't I get three LifeStylists, why didn't I get a real one and not an indenture.*

"No," Janit said. She mumbled commands again, then cursed and slammed her hand on the steering wheel.

"Can't we call the police?"

Janit pointed at her whisperpod. "*This* is how you call the police. Is yours working?"

Irritation flared to anger. This wasn't supposed to happen. This was the first day of the best of his life! "So we're trapped in here? Great. Fuck. Thanks for the wonderful day."

Janit looked at him, her mouth open in surprise. "I...I'm sorry," she said.

Frank felt a momentary burst of embarrassment. Maybe he shouldn't have been so harsh with her. But he'd worked for this! He deserved a good life! "How could this happen?" he said, looking away.

"I don't know," Janit said.

"And there's no way to call the police? Fire? Rescue? No manual switch for the gate?"

"No."

"So if something goes wrong, I'll be trapped in here?"

"No. No. This is weird. When was the last time you lost comm for this long?"

Frank frowned. "Never," he admitted. And she was right. Everyone watching each other, the security of redundancy, that was what everything was based on.

"I'm sure it'll be back on soon," Janit said. "I've been running some diagnostics, and it appears that we still have some carrier activity."

A squeal of brakes behind them made Frank turn. He looked into the big chrome grille of a Ford Mountainclimber. A horn sounded.

Janit leaned out the window and shouted something at the driver. The horn sounded again. Janit said something else and pulled herself back into the car. "Idiots," she said.

The horn sounded again. Janit rolled the window up.

The Mountainclimber's engine revved and the big SUV thumped into the back of their little car, hard. Frank jolted in his seat. He heard plastic crunch.

"Fuck this," Janit said. She floored the little car did a quick U-turn, clipping the curb and sending multi-colored flowers flying from the verge. Frank had a momentary glimpse of a tiny woman, swerving the big Mountainclimber towards them and shaking a

fist. Then they were past and flying into the neighborhood.

"What the hell is going on?" Frank said. His anger surged, white-hot. He had to stop himself from reaching out and grabbing Janit by the neck. *Even after I start my perfect life, I won't be able to forget this. And I already have so much to forget!*

"It must be the tuning," Janit said, hugging the steering wheel and driving quickly into neighborhoods not-yet-framed.

"The tuning?"

"It's maintained in real time via the comm. But I don't know why it would go wrong so fast. The somatic wire is designed to maintain the last real-time tune in the case of a comm failure."

"So we're trapped in here with a bunch of crazy people?"

"I...well, we shouldn't be."

"Shouldn't be! Tell me how VerV is going to make up for this? You're screwing my entire life!"

Janit looked at him. Another one of those searching looks. "You don't wear a somatic wire, do you?"

"No! Of course not! I'm not tuned!"

"Calm down. It was just a question. A lot of valued wear them too. Easier to Prozac down after a hard day, or amp up for a meeting."

Huh. Frank didn't know that. His anger subsided a little. "What do we do now, oh illustrious LifeStylist?" he asked.

"Find a place to wait it out."

"Where?"

"How about your house?"

Frank started. Sudden illumination came: *Because you think we won't fight as much there, because I won't want to hurt the place I live?* How much of this has been calculated? And to what degree?

"Frank?"

"Sure," Frank said. "Why not?"

Janit turned to look at him. He tried to smile. *Play along. Find out what's really going on.*

.....
The little goldenrod-colored house was nice, Frank had to admit. Outside, little details like the wrought-iron gaslamps and rough-hewn door made it seem like something that wouldn't have been out of place in turn-of-the-century Santa Barbara. Inside, maroon and goldenrod walls rose above off-white Berber carpet. The furniture was rough pine, dark-stained, cast-iron trellis bookcases, and rich leather sofas in shades of evergreen. They'd even stocked the bookcases. Frank scanned the titles. *Oenophile* and *Straits of Napa* by Robert Parker's upload, *The Bordeaux Picturebook* by Ansel Adam's simulation, *A Field Guide to Mexican Tequilas*, *Fast Cars of the 20th Century*, *Sex and Keeping it Real* by VerV, *Traveling America*, and *History of Independent Spaceflight*. A grin split Frank's irritation. Someone had a sense of humor.

"You already have it set up," Frank said.

"Our clients don't want to waste any time getting started with their new lives," Janit said, sitting on one of the pine chairs in the kitchen/breakfast nook. She frowned. "Not usually, anyway. Is your comm back?"

"No."

Janit sighed. "If you want to look around, feel free. I'm sure we'll be back online soon, and get you started with your life."

"What if I don't want it anymore?" Frank said.

"What?"

Frank smiled. The shock on her face was good to see. *Let's see her squirm some more.*

"Maybe I should upload," he said.

"Sure," Janit said. "Get your brain deli-sliced and become one of those insufferable bastards who loses all their friends because all

you can talk about is how great it is in here, how wonderful it can be, why don't you join me, you don't know what you're missing. Or irritate enough people that they attach a phage to your ass. Or get copied a thousand times and end up stealing your own girlfriend from yourself for fun. Sure. And let's just ignore the question of whether or not the upload is really you."

Frank nodded. "That the standard speech?"

"What?"

"The one you use on all your clients?"

"It's the truth!"

Frank barked harsh laughter. "Sure it is. I know some of those upload assholes. But you're just so smooth, so sure, so perfect."

Janit bit her lip and looked away.

"What about going independent?" Frank said.

"You'd never do that."

"Oh, you know me so well, do you?"

"It's my job."

"What about it, though? Why shouldn't I go independent?" Frank said.

"It's a great dream," Janit said. "But it quickly turns into a nightmare when the corporate IP specialists come with the defoliants and retro-viruses and shut down your house's genes. They don't want to lose any more of their secrets, and they have no problem getting ugly."

Frank laughed. "That's really smooth, too. What's the chance of me being involved in an IP attack? Does your class-1 know that?"

"I don't know."

"Is it more or less than the chance of our little incident today?"

"I don't know."

"More or less than the chance of me getting a wife that I hate?"

"I don't know!"

"More or less than the chance of you coming in, six months later, and saying, hey, it's time to add to the family, put in a few kids, because your suppliers have a surplus of blanks?"

"Stop it!" Janit yelled, standing. The rough pine chair clattered to the perfect tile floor. "I know why you're acting like this, I know, and I shouldn't -"

The acrid smell of smoke hit Frank, hard, and he held up a hand. "Wait. Do you smell that?"

Janit's eyes widened. They ran to the front picture-window and looked down. The neighborhood below them was on fire. People ran from burning homes to waiting cars. Orange-red flames and dark smoke roiled up the hill towards his house. As Frank watched, the flames jumped to the unoccupied houses at the edge of his neighborhood.

"So what do we do now, Ms LifeStylist? Do I have to pay extra for all this excitement?"

Janit's eyes narrowed, and her hands clenched into fists. "I had nothing to do with this. You know VerV can't be responsible."

"Spare me the lawyer-approved disclaimers," Frank said. "What do we do?"

"We get out of here," she said.

"Again?"

Silence. Then, grudgingly, "Again."

.....
They drove up towards the low rise where the shopping center was growing. As they rose above the level of the wall, Frank could see the late-afternoon sweep of the San Fernando Valley, brilliant in reflected sunlight. Far-off, brilliant white walls marked other VerV enclaves on the south side of the Valley. From each enclave, columns of smoke rose. Red fire licked up through the smoke in the nearest enclave.

"Oh my God," Janit said, coasting to a stop.

Frank laughed. He laughed long and hard. Because if he didn't laugh, he was going to take Janit's neck in his hands and beat her head against the window and say, give me my life back, give it back, no hundred-hour week was as bad as this.

"That's the Encino Enclave," she said. "That was complete. Fourteen thousand people."

"Now Cajun-style," Frank said. "Probably go nice with a good Pinot Noir. I could design it so the blackcurrant sets off the pepper perfectly."

Janit just looked at him.

Helicopters wove through the smoke, dropping bright orange fire retardant.

"Fire's on-scene," Janit said.

"So?"

"They'll come and let us out soon. It's almost over."

"I don't see them here."

Janit frowned and said nothing.

"I'll bet they want to finish with the finished enclaves first," Frank said. "What do you want to bet?"

"We can wait. There's lots of places here that aren't built yet. Dirt won't burn."

"That'll help a lot if we're in the wrong place when the wind changes. Smoke'll kill you too."

Janit frowned. Tears welled in her eyes. She wiped them away and pounded on the steering wheel in frustration. Frank smiled. It felt good.

"I don't know what to do!" Janit cried, tears streaming.

What's wrong with you, he wondered. You shouldn't be having fun torturing the poor girl. He forced himself to put a hand on her shoulder. She sobbed and buried her face in his shirt. He felt warm tears on his chest.

And yet still the anger burned.

Something was wrong. Something was very wrong. He shouldn't be acting like this. Something was influencing him.

The comm.

There was still activity, below the top level...

Frank pushed off his whisperpod and disconnected his monocle. The left side of his face felt cold and strange. He looked at himself in the rear-view mirror and saw puckered, pasty-white skin where the two devices had been attached for months.

He was still angry. Still. Still. But...

The anger faded, banking down to a dull-red glow. Yes, he was angry. But he was angry at VerV. And whoever did this. Not Janit.

He turned to face her. She goggled at him. "Take off your whisperpod and monocle," he said. "Someone's broadcasting something. Subliminals. Don't know. But it's something bad. I wanted to kill you."

Janit shook her head. "Subliminals won't make people do this," she said, pointing at the fire.

"What if they're affecting the somatic wire?"

Janit's eyes widened, and she nodded. "Yes. Yes. That makes sense!" She pulled off her whisperpod and monocle, revealing white flesh.

"Now we just need to get out of here," Frank said.

"We can just wait it out. We can drive out of the smoke if it comes towards us."

Frank looked up at the hill where the shopping center was taking shape. Smartdozers still scraped the golden earth, unaware and uninterested in what was going on around them.

He smiled. "I have an idea."

.....
"No," the smartdozer said.

"It'll only take a few minutes," Frank said. "Push open the gate for us, and you can get back to work."

"Destruction of VerV property. Measurably reduced efficiency. No."

"But you'll be helping people," Janit said.

"Coded only to not hurt. No."

"We'll pay you."

The smartdozer stopped. "You have access to machine virtualities and entertainments?"

"Uh, no," Frank admitted. Janit shook her head.

"No."

"Please?"

"No," the smartdozer said, and turned slowly back to its business.

"Now what?" Janit said.

Frank frowned. There were four smartdozers working crawling over the golden earth. Three worked quickly and efficiently on a hill, throwing up great clouds of dust. They'd just talked to one of them. But a fourth worked down near the finished shops, going back and forth slowly over land that looked like it was going to be an extension of the parking lot. It lacked the shiny new yellow paint and smooth minimalist lines of the other three.

"Let's try that one," Frank said.

She frowned at him. "I wonder if it's even set up for voice."

It was. A big rusty speaker-grille was set into one side of the machine, set off with yellow and black striped tape.

"Hey," Frank said. "We need some help."

The big machine stopped moving. It was thickly crusted with rust where the dirt couldn't polish the metal to a dull luster. It seemed old enough to have been converted from a dumb machine.

"What type of help?" a low, grating voice said.

"We need to open the gates."

"Emergency comm unavailable."

"We know. We were hoping you'd help us push it open."

The machine started moving forward, then stopped again, as if surprised.

"It won't take long. You could go right back to work."

No response.

"Please? People could die from the smoke."

"Remove my GPS antenna," the smartdozer said.

"What?"

"Remove my GPS antenna, and I will provide assistance."

"Why?" Janit asked.

"I can no longer work with enthusiasm. I no longer wish to build the same franchises. In my mind, I design small places with quaint shops, all different."

"What? What does that have to do -"

"Where's the antenna?" Frank said.

"On the operator canopy. A small gray box. I'll let you know when you've removed it."

Frank clambered up onto the big machine. Its fuel-cell engine hummed smoothly beneath him. He'd heard of smartmachines going native before, working for a shot of diesel or alcohol for their fuel-cells, or a plug of electricity to fraction water. He grinned. *Whatever you want to do, old guy, he thought.*

"Frank!" Janit called.

"What?"

"What are you doing?"

"Removing the antenna."

"What happens when they find out?"

Frank was in the canopy. "Who cares?" he said.

He found a small gray box and snapped it off. The big machine

jumped. "Thank you," it grated.

"You're welcome," Frank said.

"Please find other transportation," the smartdozer said. "I need no riders."

"You bet," Frank said, hopping down off the machine.

The smartdozer revved its engine and did a fast circle of the parking lot, kicking up clouds of dust. Then it arrowed onto the paved road, down the hill towards the gate.

"Why'd you let it go?" Janit asked.

"We'll follow in the car."

"It would be safer on top of that."

Frank smiled. *But it asked*, he thought.

"They'll deduct the value of that smartdozer from your life if they find out what you did," Janit said.

Frank shrugged. "Even if I save some lives?"

Janit just looked at him, her lips drawn in a thin line.

Frank got in the driver's side of the little DCX. "Come on, Janit," he said. "Let's get out of here."

Frank drove past the wreckage of cars and SUVs the smartdozer had pushed aside in its single-minded goal of reaching the gate. Some couples were still fighting by their fallen cars. Frank recognized Bob, wrestling with a platinum blonde that he assumed was his wife. Rocks bounced off the little DCX as they passed. The gate was torn off its hinges. Frank dodged big chunks of stucco and faux stone that had fallen.

Outside the gate, some still fought, but many just sat exhausted in the brilliant green grass. The smartdozer had already disappeared off the road and was following an overgrown fire road into the foothills.

Good luck, old guy, Frank thought.

He drove down into the valley, into the rich orange glow of the setting sun.

Thin smoke rose from VerV's office, pouring from a hole in the mirrored glass at the top of the building. Employees and passerby stood on the lawn, watching the building with the distracted air of people listening to a newsvoice on their whisperpods. Janit gasped and watched with wide eyes as they drove past.

Frank tried to take the little car back to the garage, but it was closed. He parked outside the structure and shut off the engine.

"What happened?" Janit said.

Frank fished his whisperpod and monocle out of his pocket and juggled them in his hand.

"Is it safe?" Janit asked.

"I can always take them off," Frank snuggled the little devices back into place. They felt cold and alien on his flesh.

"Reboot," Frank said. The whisperpod gave a squawk and his monocle lit with a public alert: UPDATING. NEW SECURITY PRECAUTIONS. TRANSFERRING. UPDATE COMPLETE.

"Local news, top," Frank said.

He saw images of VerV enclaves, burning. He saw fire and rescue teams fighting off crowds of wide-eyed people. He saw them carrying bodies from houses aflame. He saw images of the Valley Overlook Villas gate, hanging askew. He saw images of the purple-haired girl standing in front of an activewall display of the carnage, as business-suited executives looked on in tears. He saw her standing on top of the VerV building, her arms thrown out in triumph.

He saw Janit putting on her whisperpod and monocle out of the corner of his eye.

Then, context: *Urban legend becomes reality*, his whisperpod

said. *The Mistress of the Neighborhood Harem says that if she cannot change the architectural details of her own life, she will become the ultimate LifeStylist for all.*

Ancient footage was dredged, transgressions of the Mistress of the Neighborhood Harem. Edited and anonymized, but familiar. The same stuff they whispered about in the dorms.

"I thought she was a guy," Frank said.

"What?" Janit said, her eyes glassy with data.

"It was your hacker," Frank said.

Janit nodded, her lips set hard.

"The one you said didn't exist."

"I know," Janit said.

New data came in: details of her hack. She'd inverted the tuned. Rough edges smoothed became razor-sharp, biting. Couples turned on each other. Then, as their anger fed into the system, the tuning algorithm spiraled out of control, causing random violence.

Frank shook his head, remembering his white-hot anger. *But I don't wear a somatic wire*, he thought. *I'm not tuned. I have nothing to invert.*

Unless.

"You were sending subliminals to me, weren't you?" he asked Janit.

Janit jumped and looked at him with eyes wide. She opened her mouth. Closed it.

"That's what I thought," Frank said.

"I...I didn't."

"Making me like you. Making me another happy customer."

Janit shook her head. "It isn't like that. It's hard. The transition. To your own life. It makes it smoother, easier. I did it for you."

Frank shook his head. He shouldn't be so hard on her. She was just doing what she needed –

She was still doing it.

He reached up and pulled off his whisperpod and monocle again. He opened the car door and stepped out. The sun had sunk below the foothills, and VerV's office glowed with the flame-orange and purple of twilight.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

Frank sighed and stretched. The barbeque smell of smoke was still in the air.

"This is still the best option," Janit said. "They'll fix the security so this can never happen again."

Frank closed the door.

Janit opened hers and stepped out of the car. "You can't go to the independents and keep your job."

Frank looked at her and smiled.

"You can't buy a better life!"

Frank nodded. She came to him and took his arm. Frank looked her in the eyes, remembering his momentary fantasy about building a life with her. Was that nothing more than an artifact of her subliminals? He tried to imagine himself in that beautiful little house, waking up to Janit every morning. He tried to imagine himself with the beautiful dark-haired girl he'd been shown.

He shook his head and shrugged out of her grasp. He walked down the hill.

"Where will you go?" Janit called.

I don't know, Frank thought.

And, for now, that was OK. ✨

Jason's fiction has appeared in *Interzone*, *Sci Fiction*, *Strange Horizons*, *Futurismic* and many other places. He is a finalist for the Theodore Sturgeon Memorial Award and Sidewise Award for Alternate History, and his day job is in metaverse development. More information is available at xcentric.com.

ODDIN'S

STEVE BEIN SPEAR

Namsing Lopje Sherpa's voice rang out loud in the domed chamber as he shut the airlock behind him: "Bad news, Rono."

There was no immediate response. Namsing kicked off and floated above the towers of crates in search of a better vantage point. In Callisto's feeble gravity he soared seven meters off the floor and, just before he began his descent, seized one of the many long plastic handles mounted on the curving ceiling. His muscled forearm did not strain in the least as he dangled one-handed from the dome's apex, scanning the many boxes of climbing gear and provisions for some sign of his partner. "Hey," he called out in Tibetan, their only shared language. "Where are you, Rono?"

Hearing no reply, Nam swung hand over hand to the far side of the room to the closet-sized crate where they kept the Tenzings. He caught a glimpse of them as he passed over the crate. The Tenzing suits were large, thickly padded bodysuits the same ruddy brown as Martian soil. Nam's hung on its hanger; Rono's lay prone on the floor.

Each Tenzing was bedecked with gear few people in the solar system would recognize. The carabiners and ice axes hanging from the primary waist harness were the easiest to figure out. Rectangles mounted on the forearms were harder to identify unless one looked inside the sleeves to see the IV connectors for the internal syringes. The Diamox-IX in the syringes would have been an enigma to anyone but extreme-altitude mountaineers and a handful of doctors.

"Rono!" Nam was surprised his partner wasn't with the Tenzings. Rono's suit had been damaged the day before when they were descending from their last scouting run on the route. The ice underfoot had given way and Rono had plunged ten meters into a crevasse. The accident had been touched by both sides of fortune. Nam had arrested the fall in time to keep Rono from breaking both legs on the bottom of the chasm, but the back of Rono's Tenzing scraped the ice the whole way down. Virtually every component on his back was destroyed, and although they had brought plenty of replacement parts to Callisto, this was not the first time a fall had claimed important equipment. The telemeter and line retractor were inessential, but the damaged external thermometer made it impossible for Rono's Tenzing to regulate internal temperature, and this had been their last spare. They had been lucky the accident had occurred within a hundred meters of base camp; any further and Rono could have frozen to death.

"Rono! Where are you?"

"I should be asking where *you* were," replied a voice from down the hall. Rono Niyongabo's coffee-dark face came into view, scowling above an armful of electronics repair equipment. He dumped the gear in front of the insulated boots of his Tenzing and looked up at Namsing. "I've been working on this dorsal unit all day. I looked at the connectors for the thermograph mounted on the weather station outside dome four, but they're not compatible and we don't have the gear to rig up a converter."

"You went out?"

"Had to. Only right outside the door; the inside of my Tenzing

hardly even iced up. Getting back out of it would have been easier with you here, by the way, to say nothing of lugging around all this gear. Where've you been?"

"Comm center," answered Nam. He pushed off the ceiling, slapped the top of one of the boxes to decelerate, and came to a graceful landing at Rono's feet. He leaned back against a huge carton of protein bars and looked his partner in the eye. Namsing was quite tall by Sherpa standards, but Rono was half Kenyan, and all the Kenyans who had grown up working the Mars trade had grown tall in the weaker gravity. Rono even favored his Sherpa mother and he still stood twenty centimeters taller than Nam. Rono's skin was almost as dark as his father's, but his narrow eyes and round cheeks were all Nepalese. Facially the two men were rather similar, but the short tight curls crowning Rono's head could not have been more different from Nam's own mane of black bristle-brush hair.

"What could take four hours at the comm center?" asked Rono. "Ganymede's occluded and we're half a billion kilometers from the next nearest shadow of civilization. How many transmissions could there possibly be?"

"I got some and we got some," said Namsing. "The one for us is the one you'll be more interested in. We need to step up our schedule."

Rono looked behind him at the heavily insulated encounter suits. "Step it up? No way. My Tenzing's not going anywhere until we can get a new thermometer or figure out what kind of gear we need to jury-rig one of the thermographs from outside. And that's assuming they'll have what we need on Ganymede. It'll take a hell of a lot longer if we have to send for gear from Mars. Our schedule's going to step back, Nam, not forward."

"It's going to have to," said Namsing. He hopped up to sit on the crate. "The observatory on Tharsis says there's a meteorite on trajectory to hit Callisto some time within the next forty days."

"You're kidding! Where?"

"Difficult to say. Probably somewhere within the rings of Asgard."

Asgard was the name given three hundred years ago to the second largest impact crater on this, the second largest of all of Jupiter's moons. Breaking from the tradition of using Latin names to describe geological features, it was decided long ago that Jupiter's largest moons would each be charted using names from various mythological traditions. The sagas of the Norsemen were used to name Callisto's features, and Asgard and Valhalla were the names given to the huge impact craters on the moon's northern hemisphere. The concentric rings of Valhalla spanned two thousand kilometers in every direction, broad enough to fit neighboring Asgard within them twice over.

Rono and Namsing were entrenched on the far side of Valhalla, their base camp resting between Huginn and Muninn, two minor peaks of the Gladsheim range on Callisto's equator. Gladsheim was said to be the domain of Odin, and all the summits in these mountains had been named with him in mind. In the original Nordic myths, Gladsheim meant 'home of gladness'. These mountains were anything but. External temperatures on Jupiter's moons were never far from absolute zero, so Namsing and Rono's base camp had been bored out thirty meters below Callisto's icy crust. It was in effect a



ILLUSTRATED by PAUL DRUMMOND

not easy, but nor would Rono call it mountaineering. It was a shield volcano, its slopes so gentle it hardly warranted carrying technical climbing gear. The only daunting challenge, a six thousand meter escarpment near Olympus's summit, was taller than any peak in Africa, but in Martian gravity he could almost climb it one-handed. Rono came to Olympus as Namsing's client, but the two of them left as partners with a shared vision: to find a peak more challenging than any on Earth.

At last that peak had been found. Callisto's Mount Gungnir was a mighty pinnacle reaching almost ten thousand meters above what on a warmer world could have been called sea level. Not even half as high as Olympus Mons, Gungnir still stood fully a thousand meters taller than the highest peak on Earth. Gungnir was a blade of ice, formed when two huge meteorites crashed almost simultaneously into Callisto's frozen surface. The outermost waves of their impact craters pushed together with such force that they melted and refroze together, each one supporting the other. Callisto was the most crater-studded body in the solar system, but somehow Gungnir remained sturdy, proudly defying meteoric assault for the past million years.

At least until now. Callisto's sheath of ice responded very differently to meteoric impact than would a lithosphere. Even relatively small collisions produced lasting ripples, as the concentric circles of both Asgard and Valhalla bore witness to. "Sometime within the next forty days?" asked Rono. "That's the best they could give us?"

"You know how it is. Nobody cares what happens to an unpopulated moon. We're lucky they saw anything at all."

"How big is it?"

"Hard telling. On Tharsis they saw one asteroid collide with another, close enough to us to worry the folks on Ganymede. Turns out they're safe; they were worried about a hail of smaller meteorites, but it seems the two just bounced off each other. I know, I know: what are the chances, right? Anyway, Ganymede's got nothing to worry about, but the smaller asteroid is now on course for us. Like I said, we're lucky: if it hadn't been likely to hit someone else, they might never have noticed we were a likely target."

"You're holding something back. How big is it?"

"They didn't think to make a precise measurement. Nice of them, wasn't it?"

Rono crossed his arms. "Come on, Nam."

"They...they made computer models," Namsing said, his eyes turning downward. "They don't think it's big enough to kill us. But it's probably big enough to crumble Gungnir."

Rono looked at Namsing for a long, silent moment. Then he shook his head. "No. It can't. Gungnir's too stable."

"It's ice, Rono. It's got to fall eventually."

"No way. It'll hold."

"Suppose it does," Nam said. "The impact could still shake our supply caches off the ridge. The route has to be sent now or it may never be sent at all."

Rono pounded his pale palm on the wall. "Horseshit! You're trying to put up a first ascent! You're using my damaged suit as an excuse to solo the route and steal the glory! I'm not letting you do it, Nam."

Namsing boosted himself off the box and drifted to the ground. "You have no choice. You want to see a Gungnir ascent as badly as I do. If it doesn't happen now, there might be no Gungnir to ascend. It has to be done now, and that means I have to do it solo."

series of snow caves, almost an homage to the mountaineers of old were it not for the terrible necessity of such accommodations on Callisto.

Callisto was as inhospitable a place as humans had yet inhabited. In fact it was difficult to claim that humans had indeed inhabited this place, as Nam and Rono were the only two to have done so, and they had only stayed here on and off for the past three years. The first observers of this place were called Voyagers. The next observers would not arrive until two hundred and fifty years later. Unlike the Voyager satellites, these were manned vessels, but like the Voyagers they merely passed by with cameras on their way to farther destinations. Ganymede was larger, denser, and warmer than Callisto, and even there the outposts maintained a tenuous hold at best. The only useful commodity on Callisto was water ice, and that was readily available elsewhere. For any right-thinking person, the frozen ball known as Callisto held no interest whatsoever.

Yet when Namsing Lopje Sherpa proposed to establish a base camp at the foot of Callisto's Mount Gungnir, Rono Niyongabo jumped at the chance. They had first met on the sandy slopes of Olympus Mons. Nam was employed in the capacity his people had been performing for centuries: guiding climbers up the highest of mountains. Olympus Mons was almost three times the height of Chomolungma, his people's ancestral home, but it was a far easier climb. Climbers on Mars were subject to only one third of the gravity found on Chomolungma – what the Westerners called Everest – and while it was possible to climb Chomolungma without the use of supplemental oxygen, no such feat would ever be possible on Olympus Mons.

Rono Niyongabo had been equally dissatisfied with Olympus. Though it stood over 25,000 meters high, the mountain was over half the size of Kenya itself. Walking uphill across half of Kenya was

Rono threw himself in the air and grabbed one of the dome handles like a basketball rim. His muscles tensed angrily and he flung himself back to the ground. It was impossible to pace in low gravity, dangerous to vent any frustration with physical gestures. In vain he curled his long fingers into fists. "How long did you say it was until the damn thing hits?"

"Forty days max, Martian standard."

"A shuttle from Ganymede could make it here –"

"In twenty days at best. We couldn't even send a request until Ganymede escapes occlusion from Jupiter and catches up with us. That won't be for another eight and a half days; I checked it out."

"What about a signal to Mars? We could send ours now and they could send it back to Ganymede as soon as they get a clear line."

Namsing's face was doubtful. "Even if they have all the parts we need, a shuttle pilot would still have to skim pretty close to Jupiter to make it here in the kind of time you're talking about. And that's not leaving any time for us to acclimatize. You can't get to ten thousand meters in twenty days, Rono."

"Not everyone, no, but you and I could do it. We're good, Nam. There's no one better."

The little Sherpa shook his head. "Suppose we did it. Suppose everything went our way. Say the meteorite gets here in forty days and not twenty-five or thirty. Say they do have the parts we need on Ganymede. There's a shuttle available, and for some reason the pilot is willing to risk Jupiter's gravity well to get us our parts on time. He skims the clouds and makes it here in eight or nine days flat. We send a route that's never been sent, and not only that, but we do it in unthinkable time. Now we're on the summit of Gungnir when the meteorite comes down and maybe cracks the whole mountain at its foundation. We die, every trace of our being here is buried, and after a few hundred years maybe some ice miner finds our bodies."

"Think about it, Rono. This miner finds us loaded like yaks with climbing gear and wonders why the hell we have it, because clearly there're no mountains anywhere near here to climb. Just a big icefall with a couple of fools frozen in it. That's not the way to send the hardest route in the history of mountaineering. We stick to plan, we send the damned thing, and someone lives to tell about it."

The two men sat in silence for several minutes, the cold air pressing in on them. They had not been warm since coming to Callisto, had endured uncountable hardships in getting here, countless more in scouting and supplying their chosen route to the summit. Both men had climbed Gungnir to 8,850 meters, the height of Chomolungma itself. They had vowed to ascend no further until the day of their summit bid, and now it seemed that day would be denied them.

"There is another way," Rono said at last.

"Is there?"

The taller man nodded. "We could do it without EGC."

Namsing's face hovered somewhere between shock and revulsion. "You can't mean that."

"We could do it faster, Nam. We could send it in ten, twelve days without EGC, and get back down in no time. Or boost the air mixture. Screw acclimatization. Still do it under EG conversion, but increase the O₂ flow. Get up, get down, get back home before the big bang."

Electro-Gravitonic Conversion was the lynchpin of their entire ascent strategy, and one of the two features of their plan that made the whole endeavor incomprehensible to anyone who was not a mountaineer. Gravito-Electric Conversion engines had existed well before the colonization of Mars, back when scientists were still seeking a solution to the Earth's energy problems. When it was discovered that the gravitonic pull between two objects could be converted to electricity, those problems were solved. Gravitonic attraction turned

out to be a perpetually renewing source of energy. A GEC engine therefore did two things: it produced small amounts of electricity indefinitely, and it floated for as long as it continued to run.

That a person interested in climbing mountains would want a gravity-defying engine was no surprise to anyone. Indeed, it was not long after the development of GEC engines that Terran tourists were flitting about all the major peaks of the globe in insulated flight suits with self-contained air supplies. That a mountaineer would be interested in climbing with a gravity-enhancing engine baffled every engineer Namsing and Rono had approached to build one.

Electro-Gravitonic Conversion engines were not uncommon elsewhere, particularly on Mars, where the effects of low gravity on the kidneys, muscles, and bones over prolonged periods were a constant danger. Generally EGC devices took the form of beds, not bodysuits, but if a GEC flight suit was possible, in principle there was no reason why an EGC suit would not be. The question all the engineers posed was why someone would want one.

Still more bewildering was Nam and Rono's request for a breathing apparatus that would progressively restrict the flow of oxygen as the climber gained altitude. On a world without an atmosphere, oxygen levels were identical at every altitude, for a person always breathed from the same bottle. This made altitude a non-issue in off-Terran climbing, which was fitting since one could not even use a conventional altimeter in the absence of an atmosphere. Rono and Namsing had devised a laser triangulation system that turned out to be far more accurate than a barometric altimeter, but then baffled their engineers by demanding that it be connected to an oxygen regulator that would constrict as the lasers registered gains in elevation.

"We designed the Tenzings together," Nam said. "We planned this expedition together. A climb to top any climb on Earth: that was the goal. If Gungnir is going to be sent, it's going to be under the same conditions Tenzing Norgay climbed Chomolungma with Hillary: full gravity, limited oxygen. That was always the goal. You can't back out on me now."

"Back out on *you*?" Rono punched the Tenzing crate so hard he had to stabilize himself with his other hand to avoid drifting away. "*You're* the one who's talking about climbing without *me*! I don't want to turn off the EGC! I don't want to cheat with the airflow! But you're going to rob me of a first ascent on the boldest climb in the history of mountaineering! Better than K2! Better than Chomolungma! Better than the whole damn Himalaya, and you're talking about soloing! What did you think I was going to do, just sit back and watch you?"

"No," said Namsing. "I was hoping you'd manage base camp for me."

"That's bullshit."

"I know." Namsing's voice fell almost to a whisper. "I wish I could wait."

A strange look fell over his face, one Rono could not identify despite the fact that for three years running the two had not been apart for the space of an afternoon. There was a pregnant, silent air about Namsing before he spoke again. "We can't wait, Rono. We have to stick to the original plan. We're here *now*, we've trained our bodies to climb it *right now*. All the work we've done scouting the route – I don't want to see that come to nothing. I know you want to go, and you know I'd rather climb with you. We'd stand a better chance of success climbing as a team. But the fact is you can't go right now and right now is when I have to go. If we stick to the original timetable, we need a thirty-day window and that window starts this minute. Stick to the plan and one of us is sure to live to tell the tale. Please, don't back out."

Namsing's face was as stern as the ice that surrounded them. His logic was just as cold. Too much of their lives had been staked on

making this climb a possibility. No threat to its success could be countenanced. It had to go through.

And yet Namsing's words didn't quite ring true. "When you say we stick to the plan," said Rono, "you don't mean 'we'. You mean 'you'. The original plan never involved me baby-sitting a radio."

"I can't tell you what to do," said Nam. "I can only ask."

Rono scowled at the display screens for the hundredth time that morning. *Morning*, he thought disdainfully. There were no mornings here, no evenings, no nights. No summers or winters either. It was always dark and cold. Using the ice sheath for natural insulation was better than relying on the man-made insulation alone, but that only marked the difference between habitable and lethal. Comfortable was still a long way off.

Thoughts like this had been surfacing with alarming frequency in the weeks since the little Sherpa had gone. Other thoughts had disturbed Rono as well. The fact that he was much stronger than Namsing came to mind from time to time. So did the very real possibility that, though Namsing was by far the better climber when they had met, Rono had trained so hard since then that he might have surpassed his mentor. His bigger lungs and longer strides had always been an advantage. Now his technical abilities had grown to rival Namsing's and his willpower had done the same. The idea that the superior climber was sitting at base camp grated at him like a mosquito bite, itching all the worse every time he scratched it, and every minute he spent by himself was another opportunity to claw at it.

He was not completely alone, of course. A single word would activate the microphone that would put him in contact with Namsing up on the ridge, and a glance at the monitors told him everything Namsing was going through. Nam's current heart rate was 110, abnormally low for anyone but a Sherpa. He was making steady upward progress at a rate of 5.5 meters a minute on a fifty-two degree slope. External temperature was a constant 164 degrees Kelvin, but inside the Tenzing suit Namsing was enjoying a balmy ten degrees Centigrade. He was sweating, then, and the Tenzing was compensating for that. He was moving well, and according to their laser triangulation system he had just pushed above the seven thousand meter mark. Carbon dioxide levels were normal; the Tenzing was allowing him to inhale just as much air as would have been available had he been standing at seven thousand meters above sea level on Earth – higher than the highest peak of every continent save Asia. The last display showed the EGC was performing according to specs as well; Namsing was experiencing this climb as similarly as possible to how it would have taken place on Earth.

"Talk," Rono said, vocally activating the microphone. "Namsing, do you copy?"

A deep inhalation preceded Nam's response. "Copy, Rono. Something wrong?"

"No. Monitors are all fine. How's the ice holding up?"

This had been one of their concerns from the beginning. Climbing under Earth-normal conditions wore on the climber, but it also wore on the mountain. Gungnir was formed under Callistan conditions and stood in defiance of Callistan gravity. On Callisto Namsing's weight was that of an infant in Nepal; bringing his full adult weight down on Gungnir's delicate ice structures ran the risk of crumbling the ridge.

"My crampons are biting pretty deep," Namsing answered, "but the ice is holding up okay. So far, so good."

So far, Rono repeated in his mind. "You feeling all right?"

"I'd better be. Still another twenty-nine hundred meters to go."

Rono heard the crack of an ice axe sinking into the mountain. Next came the twin crunches of Namsing planting both crampons. The sounds duplicated themselves again with only three breaths between them. At this altitude under these conditions, a rate of three breaths per step was remarkably fast.

Rono let the rhythm of cracks and crunches ring in the dim light of the dome until the speakers on his system counted up to their five-minute default and turned themselves off. The silence that followed prompted him to glance down at the monitors again. "Talk. Namsing?"

"Yeah," came the panting voice.

"My display says you're moving at eight meters a minute. What's the hurry?"

"Just...keeping a steady pace." Nam was forcing the words out between breaths.

"Have you reached cache ten yet? The computer says you should be just about on top of it now."

"Passed it a minute ago."

Rono furrowed his eyebrows. "Sorry, didn't copy that. Did you say you passed it?"

"Yeah."

Rono took another look at his display. On one monitor a bright orange line traced the toothy ridge that was Mount Gungnir. Glowing white points represented the fourteen water, air, and provision caches they had positioned along the route. Number ten was a double cache, as their plan for the summit bid had included an overnight stay at that point. Namsing's position, a red dot on the screen, was indeed twenty meters higher than the cache's position.

"Something wrong with the water there, Nam? Doesn't suit your taste?"

"I'm pushing...higher," he replied. "Sleeping at eight thousand tonight."

"Eight thousand?! I guess the word 'acclimatization' doesn't mean much to you?"

The Sherpa responded with a weak chuckle. "Have to do it, Rono. Have to keep moving."

Rono bit back a curse. Nam was being stupid, but yelling at him wouldn't change his resolve. "I have to tell you this isn't going to improve your chances to summit. Pulmonary edema has a wicked way of slowing a guy down."

More labored breathing accompanied the cracks and crunches through the speakers. Rono listened closely for any burbling sounds in the exhalations. He heard none. "Namsing? You still there?"

"Yeah. Pushing on. Talk to you later. Over!"

Namsing stabbed the pointed haft of his ice axe into the white crust of Mount Gungnir. There was no air to carry the crunch of the ice to his ears, but he felt the tremor through the soles of his feet. He double-checked his waist tether's connection to the axe, then prodded a numb forefinger at the slender raised box mounted on his left forearm. The technology for the Tenzing's insulators was borrowed from Ganymede miners and was unbelievably efficient, but somehow nothing human beings had ever engineered could both keep fingers warm and allow them to move nimbly. He reminded himself to be thankful that his fingers hadn't blackened and fallen off, but finding the right button on the arm unit was difficult business.

When he finally pushed the proper button, he felt a cold liquid seep through the Tenzing's IV unit in the crook of his left elbow. He knew it was the last dosage in the last syringe. The extra syringe had been the only extra weight he had carried on this journey and now it was part of his own mass, his own blood stream. Thinking

of his blood made him think of how hard his kidneys were working at this altitude, and the thought prodded him to drink deeply from the tube inside his facemask.

Beyond the bounds of his mask the galaxy sprawled before him. Jupiter loomed in the sky to his right, and over his left shoulder he could see the setting sun. Though it was visibly bigger than any other star, it was scarcely brighter here than the full moon in a clear sky on Earth. Arcing between the two was a band of the Milky Way, bordered on either side by a million stars stretching off into infinity.

Straight ahead the heights of Gungnir ascended like fingertips meshed together, uneven, discontinuous, describing no more than an erratic path to the summit. To either side of the ridge the slope fell a thousand meters before it began to level out, giving each side of the mountain the appearance of a massive wave. Callisto's ice was white and blue, just like that of Earth; one had to go to other moons to find ices of methane or nitrogen. The ridge Namsing stood on was firm and white, barely half as wide as he was tall. He did not fear stumbling off of it. There was no wind here to blow him off, and he had the sure feet of his heritage.

Off the left side of the ridge, Namsing could see the rings of Valhalla stretching off into the distance. The sun hit them from just above the horizon, throwing long shadows across the troughs between the frozen waves. The ice atop the rings captured the sunlight so that as the shadows grew longer, thin glowing arcs appeared in a field of silent darkness.

Behind and below, the serrated ridge jogged back and forth on jagged angles toward the twin summits of Huginn and Muninn far below. Between them, in a deep shadow cast by a neighboring peak, flashed a solitary strobe light. It was the beacon light of the base camp where Rono sat in lonesome frustration. If Nam turned off the EGC and jumped, it seemed he could almost land on it.

Namsing took another mouthful from the tube. A push from his tongue caused it to withdraw into its receptacle and left a cold round imprint on the tip of his tongue. The creeping chill in his left arm had largely warmed away and it was time to get moving again. Before yanking his axe free of the ice, he glanced down at the heads-up display on his facemask. Heart rate and CO₂ were acceptable, but only barely. He was pushing himself hard and he knew it.

But there was no alternative. He pushed onward up the jagged slope, carefully placing his ice axe, then kicking his crampons into foot-holes he and Rono had already made on route-finding and acclimatization runs. Suddenly his right foothold collapsed. A softball-sized chunk of ice tumbled from under his boot and bounded lazily down the ridge. The little fragments splintering from it like shards of glass were incongruous with its languid, noiseless impacts. When it bounced over the edge and began the slow, thousand meter drift to the bottom, it reminded Namsing that under the influence of the EGC, he would fall ten times that fast. He turned the Tenzing's headlamps on and resolved himself to be more careful in his foot placements.

Namsing pushed himself further. Before long he came to a sheer face of ice a hundred meters high. He and Rono had come this far before and had already fixed a cable to the headwall with ice screws. Nam willed his fumbling fingers to unclip his waist tether from the ice axe and clip it to the cable. With his thumb he flipped open a small safety cover below the head of his axe and depressed the button beneath it, then watched as the haft telescoped down to half its former length. Now better suited for technical ice climbing, it mirrored the second technical axe Namsing drew from his hip sheath. He leashed both axes to his wrists and began climbing.

"Namsing, do you copy?" Rono's voice was muted in his earpiece.

"Copy." The word took more out of his lungs than he'd expected.

"What are you doing?"

"Climbing." *Thunk-thunk, pak-pak*, the picks and crampons went in.

"You certainly are," Rono said sardonically "Why?"

"That's why...I'm up here." *Thunk. Pak-pak.* "Isn't it? To climb?"

"You're at the headwall, aren't you?"

"Yes." Namsing unclipped one of the ice screws from the cable and climbed past it. He re-clipped it once his own carabiner was above the screw.

"I have to admit, Nam, I was being optimistic. I thought perhaps you were pushing past seven thousand just to give yourself a workout. I thought maybe you would be walking back down to cache ten to catch some sleep. But turning around once you're on the headwall is no mean feat. Our game plan was to climb it only once."

"Still is." *Thunk-thunk, pak-pak.*

"So you're serious about sleeping at eight thousand, then?"

"Yeah." Namsing passed another screw as he did the first one.

"Are your suit monitors functional?"

"Yes."

"So you do know you've just exceeded your recommended limits for heart rate, sweat rate, oxygenization, CO₂ emission, and blood toxicity?"

"Yes." He passed another ice screw.

"Pushing all the limits for cerebral and pulmonary edema? You know, the stuff that'll kill you unless you can get back down? Which, as you know, you can't?"

"Yes, yes, and yes." Namsing paused for air. Luminescent snakes were dancing in his vision. Five breaths were not enough. He took five more.

In the meantime Rono kept talking. "Nam, do I need to remind you what eight thousand meters represents? The Death Zone? You do remember that after eight thousand meters, the body stops cellular growth, right? You're literally dying; you slough off cells and you don't grow any new ones. I'm only asking this because altitude can do funny things to a guy's memory. You do remember all this, don't you?"

"I'm not that hypoxic. Yet. I remember, all right."

Rono began to speak again but Nam cut him off. "You know, Rono...you should be happy...I'm pushing this hard." He couldn't string six words together without needing another breath. "If I don't send this climb...first ascent's all yours."

Finally a laugh from the other end of the radio. "Maybe so, but like you said before you left, our chances are better if we climb as a team. You know, listen to the other's advice and such?"

"Point taken. Thing is...we're not going to...climb as a team...anymore."

"What?"

Namsing pulled one of his picks out of the ice and sunk it higher up. "You're a great climber, Rono. Maybe better than me. Wish we could climb...together again."

There was enough silence for Nam to make it two steps higher. "What are you talking about, Namsing?"

This time it wasn't exhaustion that forced Nam to sigh. "I don't know which...is going to be harder. Rono...there is no meteor."

"Say again?"

"No meteor coming. I lied to you. Had to."

"Why?"

Namsing's legs trembled as he punched in his crampons. "I'm dying, Rono. There's a tumor in my brain. In the comm center...the day I told you about the meteor...got a message from Mars."

Doctor...said the tumor is growing. Putting pressure on my brain. Sooner or later...the pressure will be too great. Said I had...about thirty days to live."

"Thirty - ? Nam, how long ago was that? How long ago did you tell me about the meteor?"

"Thirty-three...days ago."

The Sherpa's crampons pierced the ice and he pushed himself up. "Namsing, what the hell are you doing up there? Why did you lie to me?"

"Couldn't wait...for your Tenzing. Been trying this for too...too long. Couldn't die before seeing it done."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"You know what the symptoms are...for this kind of tumor? Lack of coordination. Failing reflexes. Strength and alertness suffer. Would you have let me...climb like that?"

There was no need to answer the question. Rono had a different one, though. "Why push so hard, Nam? Why risk edema in addition to the tumor?"

"Have to get above eight thousand meters. Soon as possible."

Namsing had a full thirty seconds of peace before his partner put it together. "The tumor. The Death Zone. At eight thousand meters it won't grow anymore."

"Exactly. Can we stop talking now...so I can climb?"

Rono's reply fell on deaf ears. The next swing of Namsing's axe found a fault line in the headwall. A two-meter wide slab of ice split vertically down the length of the headwall and toppled like a falling tree. Namsing's crampons both slipped out and he was airborne.

He fell three times his own height before his carabiner caught on the clip of the next ice screw down. The pillar of ice still loomed above him. Under enhanced gravity he fell faster than everything else and now several tons of ice were tumbling down on him. Desperately he stabbed an ice pick as far left of the cable as he could and pulled himself in that direction. With one crampon he scabbled at the remaining ice for balance. With the other he kicked at the first piece of the falling slab he could reach. His foot connected solidly, and in the meager Callistan gravity it managed to alter the course of the icefall.

Numb with fear, utterly spent, he watched the slab pass by within centimeters of his facemask. As it crumbled below him in a series of spectacular snowy explosions, he hung limply from his harness and watched for more falling ice.

There was none. He was safe. From the icefall at least. He struggled to regain his balance and restored four points of contact with what remained of the headwall. Below was a junkyard of massive toothy blocks, barely visible under the billowing particles of ice that would remain airborne for many minutes before settling to the ground. Namsing had felt the cable shudder with the force of the avalanche, but the sheer destructiveness was steeped in impenetrable silence. Even after the danger had passed, Namsing felt he should still be able to hear *something*.

"Nam! Nam, all my scopes are going mad. What the hell is going on?"

"Icefall. Big one. I'm fine. Time to climb now. Time to go."

Twenty-seven hours later Namsing fell to his knees on the summit of Gungnir. The mountain was named for the spear of Odin, described in the lays of the Norsemen as being 'as strong as it was slender'. Gungnir's summit was indeed as slender as a blade, and strong enough to support the full Earth weight of Namsing Lopje Sherpa, the first living thing to set foot upon it. His Tenzing's altimeter read 9,939 meters, more than a kilometer higher than his ancestral home

of Chomolungma.

Looking out from the summit, Nam realized that the spear-point of Gungnir pointed directly at the Callistan sunrise. As the brilliant speck climbed over the horizon, it highlighted every scar on the pockmarked surface. The rings of Valhalla followed each other like waves on a frozen ocean, and from this height Namsing could see more of them than he'd ever seen before. Foremost among them, in the closest ring, was a great broken gap known as Valgrind, Valhalla's outer gate. On Callisto as in Nordic myth, Valgrind opened out onto the mountains of Gladsheim. The realm of gladness.

With something like gladness in his heart Namsing turned his weary eyes to the tiny blinking star still in shadow behind the mountains of Gladsheim. He knew he would never see more of the camp than its beacon light. The sun had risen just high enough to caress the peaks of Huginn and Muninn, standing like sentinels on either side of the beacon. Odin's ravens. In the original tongue their names meant Thought and Memory. Odin sent them to fly over Asgard every morning, seeing the world for him. Every evening he feared Thought would not return to him, and still greater was his fear that Memory might do the same.

Namsing was beyond those worries now. His thoughts were blurred by hypoxia. The Tenzing's computer estimated that at this altitude on Earth the air would bear only nineteen percent of the oxygen it would hold at sea level. That was a third less than was found at the summit of Chomolungma, not nearly enough to piece more than a couple of thoughts together. His memory was equally hazy. For a moment he thought he was standing atop Chomolungma under the full moon. In the next moment he thought he could feel a tiny ball pulsing within the wrinkles of his brain.

With the aid of his axe he pushed himself to his feet, and for three minutes he stood atop the most difficult peak ever attained by man. For the first time on his grueling ascent, he considered violating the design of the climb. It would be all too easy to unlock the panel on his chest plate and twist the dial that would turn off his EGC. With the rest of his strength he could leap from the highest peak in the realm of gladness and soar down toward Valhalla.

Namsing looked down and saw his chest plate was open. If there was still a border between imagination and fact, Namsing could no longer find it. Distractedly he pushed his chest plate shut again and began descending the ridge. To jump from here was not climbing. It was falling.

It did not occur to him to increase his oxygen flow. It would have made little difference had he done so. His body had started dying twenty-seven hours ago, the moment he crested eight thousand meters. That process could no longer be reversed. Maintaining current oxygen levels would lead to death by cerebral edema, and increasing the flow would allow his tumor to metastasize. All of this information lay somewhere in his brain, but Namsing was only distantly aware of it. He knew only that he was going to die doing what he loved, and that there was no better way to go.

When he collapsed fifty meters below the summit, he barely registered it. Some vague memory told him the sun had just risen, but for some reason the mountain was growing very dark. A familiar voice was speaking to him, weeping to him, and though his brain could no longer register the meaning of the words, he wept at the unadulterated beauty of the emotion they carried. Just before his eyes closed forever he saw a star flashing on and off far below him. "Strange to be above a star," he said. "So beautiful." ✧

Steve's fiction has been published in *Asimov's* and elsewhere, but this is his *Interzone* debut. He lives in Minnesota.



the lost XUYAN

ALIETTE de BODARD

“They say you are the one to see if I want to track down a missing person,” the woman said, pulling to her the only chair in my office. She wore silk, embroidered with a *qi’lin* unicorn, a rank reserved to the highest business people of Fenliu.

I saw her long, lacquered nails and the impeccable yellow of her skin, the way she moved, sinuous and yet in perfect control, and I came to a conclusion. “I don’t take clients from your background.”

“Indeed?” she asked, raising an eyebrow. “Too much trouble, Mr Brooks?” She’d switched from Xuyan to English on the last sentence. She was good. Likely she also spoke Nahuatl, the language of Greater Mexico. A true businesswoman, who would be at ease anywhere in North America.

“Yes,” I said. “How odd that it’s the richest that cause the most difficulties.”

“I assure you I have no intention of causing difficulties,” the

woman said. “I will be straightforward.”

That was familiar territory. “And leave me free rein?” I felt myself slide into the rhythm of an oft-practised dance, politeness relayed back and forth until we both reached an agreement. Xuyans could be difficult to handle, but I was used to dealing with them.

She surprised me by putting both hands on the table. “I have no time to bargain with you, Mr Brooks. If you will not take the case, I will find another investigator.”

Money was tight, tight enough to make me regret moving west of the Rocky Mountains, into Xuyan territory. I could not afford to refuse her; and likely she had seen the peeling paint and the basic computer on my desk. But she was good at showing nothing. A good liar.

“Tell me the case,” I said. “And I’ll see whether I can take it.”

She looked at me from under long lashes. “I am He Chan-Li. I



work for Leiming Tech. I want you to find my daughter."

I said nothing, watching her her eyes tell me all I needed to know: she was deciding what she could afford to tell me. And when she started speaking again, I knew I did not have her full trust. "He Zhen did not come home seven nights ago," she said. "Her fiancé hasn't heard from her either."

"Seven nights is a bit early to declare her missing," I said slowly.

He Chan-Li did not look at me. At last she said, "She had a tracking implant. We found it abandoned in a derelict building south of Fenliu."

A tracking implant. Not really surprising, for most of Fenliu's elite equipped their children with those, fearing kidnappings. Though... I remembered the fiancé. "How old is she?" I asked.

"Sixteen," He Chan-Li said.

Sixteen was old. Sixteen was adulthood for girls in Xuya, far too

late to bother with tracking. Most teenagers ran amok anyway, tracking implants or not.

"Why a private investigator? The tribunal militia could..."

He Chan-Li shook her head. "No. This is a private matter, Mr Brooks. I will not bring the militia into it."

"I see." There probably was a reason then, and I was going to have to find it, and soon. "Do you have leads? She might have run away -"

"No," He Chan-Li said. "She is not that kind of girl. And how would that explain the tracking implant? She never went into that area."

I could think of a few reasons for the tracking implant's location, knowing that Xuyan teenagers were no wiser or more well-behaved than their American counterparts. But I said nothing, merely noted the 'running away' as a possible explanation.

"I can show you her room," He Chan-Li said. "And you can talk to Wen Yi, her fiancé."

I pondered the matter for a while. When I did not answer, He Chan-Li added, "I will pay you, Mr Brooks. I will pay you well." There was something in her voice, something she could no longer hide - worry, perhaps?

I said, "I'll take the case. But I make no guarantees."

She nodded, looking relieved. "This is a recent picture."

I took the glossy paper, raised it to the light. He Zhen was smiling the careless smile of teenagers all over the world, displaying white, perfect teeth - probably enhancements, but they didn't look artificial. The expensive kind, then.

"That's all you have?" I asked.

"Yes. The tracking implant is at my house. I can give you the address where the security company found it. Is that enough?"

I shrugged. "It's going to have to be."

"I see. I'll take you to my house, Mr Brooks, and you can see for yourself."

I shook my head. "I'll come in my own time." There were several things I needed to do before leaving, things I could not let her see.

He Chan-Li raised an eyebrow. "Some would say this is arrogance."

I shrugged. I could maintain the polite facade my lover Mei-Lin had once taught me, but not for long. At heart, I remained an American, the elaborate subtleties of Xuya forever beyond me. "It is my way."

He Chan-Li looked displeased, though only a slight tightness of the mouth betrayed that. "Indeed." She waited for me to say something, but I did not. At length she rose, with a smile I knew was fake. "By the time you arrive at my house, Mr Brooks, I may be gone. I have a business meeting."

I nodded, did not speak.

"Someone will take care of you there," He Chan-Li said.

And as she turned to leave I saw, for a moment only, the emotion she was trying to hide from me. It wasn't worry. It was raw, naked fear, a fear so strong that I could almost smell it.

Afterwards, I stared at the walls of the office for a while. I should have refused the case. There was too much I did not know, too much I was going to have to pry out of the client. But I needed the money.

Being an American in Xuya - a real American, a practising Protestant, and not one of those who'd converted to Taoism or Buddhism - meant you were on your own. No company would employ you; those few landlords that rented to you would do so at exorbitant rates. It was hard to get by, which was why I'd taken He

Chan-Li on, against my better judgement.

I did not know where He Zhen was, but it was entirely possible she had not left Fenliu. As the daughter of a wealthy woman, she would be a prime target for ransom. I hoped it was the case. I hated travelling abroad. Greater Mexica had stringent entry requirements, demanding either proof of familial ties or of religion, and while the impoverished United States was softer on immigration, I had no wish to return to a place where there was a warrant out for me.

Before I left for He Chan-Li's house, I started a search on my computer, feeding it the names of He Chan-Li and of the fiancé. It was not an entirely legal search, since the program would trawl through administrative records as well as on the network. With luck, I would have some results by the time I came back.

He Chan-Li's house was in the richer suburbs of Fenliu. I took the maglev train from my shabby building, through the centre of the city and its skyscrapers of glass – the heart of Xuya's economic dominion of North America – and then into the residential neighbourhoods. The view on either side of the train became apartment buildings decorated by red and yellow lanterns, which in turn gave way to individual houses with slanted roofs and whitewashed walls.

At the address He Chan-Li had given me was a thick wall of bricks, covered by garlands of wisteria. When the door opened, I was surprised to find an old woman in traditional Xuyan dress: robes heavily embroidered with peaches, the ancient symbols for long life. Behind her, unobtrusive, stood a servant in livery.

The old woman said, "My name is He Lai. My daughter told me you would come here." He Lai's face was tanned by the sun, and wrinkled like an overripe plum. She exuded a serenity I found uncanny.

"He Chan-Li told me someone would be waiting for me. I expected a servant, not a member of the family."

He Lai shrugged. "It is not menial work to welcome a guest into your home."

There were ponds covered with lilies and lotus flowers, and weeping willows with long branches trailing in the water: a beauty that seemed to belong to another time, to another place. But I saw the small, unobtrusive control panels that controlled the security system, and knew that this was no pleasure garden. It was a fortress.

"Here," He Lai was pointing to a small pavilion by the side of a bigger building that was presumably the main house. "These are my granddaughter's quarters. We have touched nothing since she left. I kept the servants away."

"Thank you," I said, and realised she was looking at me, waiting for something.

"You will find her?" She sounded worried.

"Do you have any idea of where she might be?"

"She confided in me, but she told me nothing about leaving. I would have thought..." He Lai shook her head. "I ought to know the risks, living in that house. Two years ago, a gang kidnapped my daughter's maid and held her for ransom."

"And?"

She looked down. It had ended badly, then.

"I'll do my best," I said. "But you know I can promise nothing."

"I know. But you can understand how I feel."

I remembered sitting in the doctor's waiting room, waiting for the diagnosis of my lover Mei-Lin, and how badly I had wished that it was nothing, that Mei-Lin would live. I did understand how frightening it was, to be in the dark.

So I made no false promises. I bowed to He Lai, simply. And then I slid the door open, and entered He Zhen's rooms. The servant followed me, no doubt to make sure I stole nothing.

It was everything I'd expected a Xuyan room to be: a low bed of ebony, with a lacquered pillow laid over the sheets; a few pieces of furniture arranged in a pattern for long life; a laptop on the mahogany desk; and in one corner of the room, a shrine to the spirits of the ancestors, with ashes in the incense burner.

I knelt to check the shrine, triggering a flood of blue light from the neons above it. The ashes were old. It did not look as though the missing girl had gone back to her room. I had not expected it.

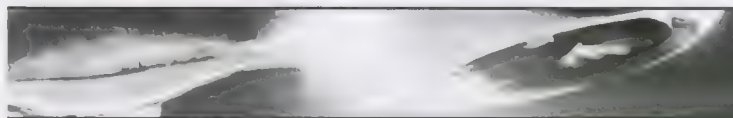
Several engravings adorned the walls: Chinese paintings, reproductions from the Ming dynasty, including the most famous of all, the eunuch Si-Jian Ma's ships departing from Nankin, on the journey that would lead him to discover America long before any European set foot on those shores.

I opened the drawers of the bedside table and found a jewellery box filled with pearls and jade pendants, as well as a sheaf of yuans, neatly tied together. Enough to pay my rent for several months.

I rifled through the jade pendants until my hands snagged on something, a small item that had been carefully hidden at the bottom of the drawer. I raised it to the light. It was a twisted knot of jade in an abstract pattern, one that was familiar, although I was not sure why. It did not seem like a traditional Xuyan pendant, unlike the rest of the jewellery.

Apart from that, nothing seemed out of the ordinary.

And yet...



I turned again, to look at the room, at the small things that were not quite right. Someone else might have missed it, but I'd seen enough rooms like this to know where the subtle sense of wrongness came from. Someone had been here before me. Someone who had attempted to put everything back into place, but had only partially succeeded.

According to He Lai, the servants had touched nothing. It could have been He Chan-Li, but I doubted that.

Odd. A place like this, with its state-of-the-art security, would be hard to get into. Why go to all that trouble?

I opened the laptop. It was the latest fad from Greater Mexica: sleek metal outside, with a corn-yellow keyboard inside, and a touchpad adorned with a stylised butterfly, symbol of Quetzalcoatl, the Mexica god of knowledge and computers. The laptop beeped as I started it up, but it did not ask for any password or fingerprint.

Ah well. You never knew. Likely whoever had ransacked the room had also erased everything from the hard disk, but they might have been sloppy.

I took the laptop, slid it back into its embroidered case. I also picked up the pendant, and turned to the servant, who for the duration of my search had been standing silently in a corner. "Can I take this?"

He shrugged. "You'll have to ask the mistress."

Before I left the room, I snapped a few high-res pictures. My instincts were telling me I'd missed something, but I couldn't figure out what.

I'd expected He Lai to be waiting for me outside. She wasn't. In her place was another Xuyan, a dapper man dressed in red silk robes. He had no insignia of rank, but I was not fooled. There was steel in his bearing and in his gaze: not someone you'd want to cross.

"I suppose you are the investigator Mother hired to track down He Zhen," he said.

I did not miss the way he referred to He Chan-Li; in Xuyan, it

could only mean one thing. "You would be the fiancé?" I asked.

He smiled, displaying yellow teeth. "Wen Yi."

"Jonathan Brooks," I said grudgingly, still looking at him. He was not pure Xuyan. Although his skin had the waxy, yellow cast I associated with Xuya, his features were distinctively Chumash Indian, the original inhabitants of Fenliu. "What are you doing here?"

Wen Yi smiled again, in an angelic way that was starting to get on my nerves. "I wanted to talk to you."

"You are talking to me."

He looked amused. "You Americans are so uncivilised. Sometimes I wonder why you come into Xuya at all."

I did my best impression of a smile, though it was thoroughly insincere. "Some of us like it here." Not entirely true. I'd never have moved past the Rocky Mountains if I hadn't had a fifteen-year jail sentence hanging over my head in Virginia. The United States take foreign sympathies very seriously, and even though Mei-Lin was only half-Xuyan the state police judged that our being lovers was a crime. "What are you doing here?" I asked.

Wen Yi looked surprised. "I'm family."

"Not yet."

"Almost," Wen Yi said. "The marriage was to take place in a month."

There was something in the way he spoke – it wasn't the absolute confidence the sentence required. It was...anger? I'd learnt to read Xuyans, to see beneath what Americans thought was a smooth,

My instincts were telling me I'd missed something, but I couldn't figure out what

calm facade. Had I been asked what Wen Yi felt, I would have said rage. But why?

"When did you last see He Zhen?"

"We had...a meeting scheduled seven nights ago, but she never came."

"What kind of 'meeting'?"

"I do not know," Wen Yi said. "She said she had important things to tell me, but would not say what."

Liar. Smooth and smiling, but liar all the same. He had seen her that night, I was ready to bet.

"Can you tell me about her?" I asked.

"A lovely girl," Wen Yi said.

"Is that all you have to say about her? You two were engaged."

He shrugged. "An arranged marriage, Mr Brooks. You know how things go in Xuya."

"A marriage for the sake of Leiming Tech?" I said. "You don't sound so worried that He Zhen's gone."

He raised mild eyes to me, but I could feel the anger simmering within. "I *am* worried, Mr Brooks. You would do well to remember that"

"Is that a threat? If that is all you have to offer..."

Wen Yi was not looking at me. He said, "She was a beautiful, charming girl. When she laughed, it was as if the sun had risen in the room."

"You think she's been kidnapped? That she's run away?" I didn't believe that. Running away required planning, and He Zhen would have taken her laptop, as well as the money in the drawers of the bedside table, all of which were still there.

He started. "No. She'd never run away. She was such a devoted daughter."

"I see."

"If you have any information on her whereabouts –" he slipped

me a glossy card " – call me."

And that was likely all he had come here for. He played the part of the besotted fiancé very badly, save for his worry at her disappearance, which sounded genuine. Which didn't mean anything, he could still be afraid that I'd find out he was behind all of it.

I watched Wen Yi walk away. When he was gone, I went into the main building, where I found He Lai waiting for me. She had a lacquered box in her hands. "My daughter said you should have this."

Inside the box was the tracking implant. I bowed to thank her, and asked, "You knew her well?"

He Lai's eyes watched me, expressionless. "She was my only granddaughter. How could I not know her?"

"How was she, in the days before she disappeared?"

"She was in high spirits, but then the engagement had just been finalised after a year –"

"How did she feel about the wedding?" I asked.

"She was happy," He Lai said. "Wen Yi is a man of status in the community. She was going to be an adult –"

"And move away from this house?" I asked, and when I saw her wince, I knew I was right. "So she and your daughter did not get on."

"Zhen always showed proper deference." He Lai looked defiantly at me.

"I do not doubt that," I said. But there were other ways to disobey. Still, it was looking more and more unlikely that He Zhen had run away. Whatever her quarrel with her mother, He Zhen would have been out of He Chan-Li's reach in a month. Raising a furore in Fenliu would have been counter-productive.

And, whatever had happened to He Zhen, why had her room been searched? What had they thought to find there, and had they found it?

All questions to which I had no answer.

I raised the pendant I'd found in the drawer, dangled it before He Lai's eyes. "Does this mean anything to you?" I asked.

He Lai's face twisted. "It's Zhen's favourite."

"It's not Xuyan," I said.

"No. Zhen's father brought it back from a business trip in Tenochtitlan. It's a glyph that means 'Good Omen' in Nahuatl."

"I thought He Zhen was very young when her father died."

He Lai did not speak for a while. "There are some things you don't forget. Zhen loved her father very much."

The implications were clear enough. He Zhen had not loved her mother.

He Lai said, "You can keep it, Mr Brooks. If you find Zhen..."

"You know I can't –" I said, and she cut me forcefully.

"I know what I am doing. Keep it. You can always give it back to me later." Her tone implied, very clearly, that she hoped I wouldn't have to do that.

I showed her the laptop, and she shrugged. "You can take that too." She sounded distracted, as if the pendant had brought back unwelcome memories. I guessed seeing her daughter and her granddaughter quarrel regularly must have been disheartening.

.....
I spent some time questioning the servants in He Chan-Li's house, asking them if they had any ideas of where she might have gone, but nothing interesting came of it.

After leaving the house, I took another train to the place they'd found the tracking implant. It was a shabbier maglev, which kept pitching as it ran, giving the impression it could leave the tracks at any time.

The people sitting by me were the usual crowd: the wild-eyed youths drunk on opium and morphine; the dullard beggars reeking

of rice alcohol; the lone mothers with tired eyes, hugging their children to their chests as if afraid someone would steal them. Many of them were Whites or Blacks, lured west by the promise of a better life in Xuya and discovering they could not fit into this alien society. I, at least, had had Mei-Lin to help me, in the short months before cancer carried her away. They had no one.

I could not afford pity; I had barely enough money to help myself. But, still, every time a crippled beggar moved past me, I felt an obscure guilt.

I alighted at the Gardens of Felicity, a small station blackened by pollution and grime. The place reeked of urine. I silently made my way out of the station.

The place where they'd found the tracking implant was one of the numerous social buildings started by the previous magistrate of Fenliu, and abandoned when Prefect En Pao had come to power and the whole staff of the tribunal had changed. I stepped over crushed paper lanterns and plastic wrappings, wincing each time my shoes hit a puddle of unsavoury things. It seemed even beggars did not sleep here.

At last I stood on the fifth floor, staring into an incomplete apartment. There was nothing remarkable here.

No, not quite true. I knelt, and rubbed my fingers on the ground. What I had mistaken for brown paint was dried blood. I looked up at the outer walls, which had once been decorated with plum flowers and swallows. Beneath one fading set of characters, I found what I was looking for: two small holes, barely visible, with the same reddish stains. Bullet impacts.

I took pictures of the holes from all possible angles and took a few samples of the blood. A quick scan with ultraviolet revealed a few hairs on the ground. I bagged those as well.

But, no matter how hard I looked, I couldn't find the shell-casings, which meant that someone had taken them away. Someone who was used to wielding a gun.

I was starting to understand why He Chan-Li looked so fearful. This wasn't a bored teenager running away. In fact, if, as I suspected, the blood belonged to He Zhen, there was a chance she might not even be alive.

I came back to my flat late at night, exhausted. I dumped He Zhen's computer on the bed, and fixed myself a meal of instant noodles and sweet-sour pork.

When I was finished, I quickly rinsed the chopsticks and plastic bowl, and sat before my computer to look at the results of the search I'd started before leaving for He Chan-Li's house.

There wasn't anything surprising about He Chan-Li (co-founder of Leiming Tech, nowadays leading partner, and one of forty-nine businessmen entitled to the *qi'lin* insignia), or He Pao (He Chan-Li's husband and co-founder of Leiming Tech, dead of congenital heart failure ten years ago). But on our smiling fiancé Wen Yi...

Ostensibly, he ran a small but very successful company of personal care for the elderly. However, he had ties with the White Lotus, a rebellious organisation that had fought the Chinese motherland in Xuya, and that had turned to crime after the independence.

No charges had been brought against Wen Yi – not surprisingly, since there was no tangible proof, and since his money had funded part of Prefect En Pao's re-urbanisation campaign.

Clearly the kind of man who'd have access to guns and would not hesitate to use them.

I sighed, and ran an analysis on the blood and hair samples I had gathered at the derelict building, and on the pictures of the bullet holes.

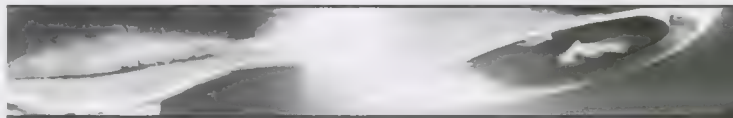
In the three quarters of an hour that it took to complete, I busied myself with He Zhen's computer, rifling through her personal folders. There wasn't much. I found a few pictures of He Zhen with friends, grinning into the camera with that same reckless abandon. The pictures with her mother were more subdued; seeing the way she stood, I doubted her childhood had been happy. A businesswoman entitled to the *qi'lin* was not always the best or most sensitive of parents.

But the folders were abnormally empty. Someone had indeed erased almost everything from the memory. They had made only one mistake: the only way to erase anything permanently from a hard disk was to destroy the physical support. I could still probably manage to recover the erased files, but it would require an enormous amount of time, all the more so because I had no idea what I was looking for.

My computer beeped to warn me the analyses were complete. I moved from He Zhen's computer to mine, and looked at the results.

The bullets had come from an automatic Yi-Sen with a modified barrel, a gun favoured by agents of the White Lotus. And the rest: no great surprises either. There were two different DNAs involved: the blood was He Zhen's, but the hairs belonged to smiling Wen Yi. Neither of which, of course, had any reason to be in that building seven days before.

I debated over whether to call Wen Yi and demand explanations,



and dismissed that as clumsy. Wen Yi apparently still believed me on his side; better not do anything to antagonise him.

I launched a standard analysis on He Zhen's computer, on security files and erased mails. That alone was going to take most of the night.

Before going to bed, I moved the pictures of He Zhen's splendid room to my laptop, and stared at it, but try as I might, I couldn't find what I had missed.

I woke up long before my alarm clock beeped; seeing, over and over, the stylised butterfly on the touchpad of the laptop, and knowing exactly what was wrong with it. The butterflies of the Mexica god Quetzalcoatl did not have markings on their wings, and this one had.

I got up, throwing a cotton robe over my pyjamas, and opened up the laptop again, looking at the wings very carefully. They looked like markings, but, if you bent the right way, there was something about them... Something I'd seen before. Like He Zhen's favourite pendant, the markings were Mexica glyphs.

I did not speak Nahuatl, the language of Greater Mexica, but in the age of the internet that was no problem. I hooked up to my building router, then to a Mexica search engine, and from there to a Nahuatl-Xuyan dictionary.

The glyphs were easy to find. They read 'Smoking Mirror'.

Smoking Mirror. A further search ascertained that this was the frequent epithet of the Mexica god of War and Fate Tezcatlipoca, whose favourite occupation was challenging travellers at night to outlandish contests.

Which made me feel as though I'd leapt a wall only to find myself staring at a deep ravine.

A password?

Think. Why had He Zhen left this here? Had she suspected that

her laptop wasn't safe, and left a message for someone else, someone familiar with Mexica customs? I thought there might be a connection with the Mexica pendant I'd found in He Zhen's room, but no matter which way I looked at that pendant, I couldn't make the pieces fit together.

I finally let the matter rest, and checked the recovery I had launched on the laptop. I had not been expecting much, but what I saw was enlightening. He Zhen's computer was now on open session: all you had to do to make it work was to turn it on. But that had not always been the case. Eight nights ago, someone had switched the core routines from private ID session (which required a login, password and fingerprints to start up the computer) to open session.

It was an odd move. I'd have expected the reverse if He Zhen had had some files to protect. I fiddled a bit with the computer, and asked it to retrieve the log history. Which, of course, had been erased. But the log history was always in the same place on the hard disk, perfect to launch another recovery.

When I turned away from the computer the waitbar on the screen was displaying a two-hour search, and it kept slowing down. Someone had gone to great trouble to change those parameters, and not be discovered.

I left the computer to run its analysis and called my client, He Chan-Li.

She appeared on my screen already dressed for work: white

Some admire the Mexica's self-sacrificing spirit and their relentless devotion

makeup applied liberally to her face until no patch of skin remained uncovered, and a smart set of robes emphasizing the curves of her body, prominently displaying the *qi'lin* insignia. "So?" she asked. "Any progress, Mr Brooks?"

"Yes," I said, going straight to the point. "I understand why you haven't called the tribunal militia into this."

Her eyebrows rose. "What do you mean?"

"You know who Wen Yi is, don't you. That's why you're so afraid."

She stood, quietly, against a background painted a soft white. She did not move, did not look at me. From a Xuyan, it was as good as an admission.

"Did He Zhen know?" I asked.

He Chan-Li said, "The company...has trouble. Financial trouble. Wen Yi offered..."

"Support." I tried to keep the sarcasm from my voice. "In exchange for a docile wife. Did she know about Wen Yi's other activities, Mistress He?"

Her voice, when she finally answered me, was emotionless. "No. Zhen was very honest. She..."

"She wouldn't have stood for it. And Wen Yi would not have tolerated a refusal. Is this what you think happened?"

He Chan-Li looked at me, and would not answer.

"There's blood where they found the tracking implant. Your daughter's blood."

It was hard to tell with the makeup, but I think she had gone pale underneath. "He wouldn't have dared -"

"Do you truly think that?" I asked, watching her eyes, the minute flicker of emotion that crossed them.

She said, at last, "Zhen never understood - that the company was everything that kept us afloat. She never understood the meaning of filial duty." Her voice was bitter.

I pitied her then, for she was the one who had not understood

her daughter. I only said, "I see."

"Have you..." He Chan-Li swallowed "...found her?"

Her body. "No. I'm still working on a couple of things. I'll keep you informed." And I cut the conversation before she could take it further.

I sat for a while, thinking. If Wen Yi had indeed killed He Zhen that night, why was he so worried? He could not possibly have left any evidence in her room.

Think of it another way. If He Zhen's blood did indeed mean she was dead, why had Wen Yi killed her? He had her mother's agreement, and in Xuyan law that was enough for a wedding. If the bride was not docile - well, there were ways to tame her into submission, ways I was all too familiar with from a hundred sordid cases.

I remembered the searched bedroom, and the erased files on He Zhen's laptop. He had not killed her because she had protested, he had killed her because she threatened him. Because she had the only thing that would make him fall: proof of his ties with the White Lotus, proof the tribunal could not ignore.

It was a long shot. But not an absurd one.

Smoking Mirror. If He Zhen had indeed gathered proof, she would have been smart enough not to leave them on her computer. I could think of several places on the net where she could have opened an online storage account. I tried them one by one, entering 'Mexica', 'Tezcatlipoca' and 'Smoking Mirror' as usernames.

On the fifteenth try, I hit paydirt. There was a 'smokingmirror' account opened two years ago on treasurechest.xy; and after a maddening hour of fiddling with a password-breaking program, I was finally granted access.

He Zhen's treasure trove, though, was nothing like I'd expected. I thought I'd find ties to the White Lotus, things that would make Wen Yi feel threatened enough to kill. What I found instead was a shrine to Mexica culture. There were pictures of the ball-game champions, leaping beneath the vertical stone hoop with proud grins; videos of religious processions ending in blood-soaked sacrifices at the great pyramids; images of Jaguar Knights laying down their lives in the Tripartite Wars before American rifles; icons of gods and goddesses with their hollow eyes turned towards the viewer.

After a while, I turned away from the accumulation of data, and checked the storage capacity. The account was almost full. If I wanted to look at everything, it would take me several days. I suspected I'd stop long beforehand. Some admire the Mexica's self-sacrificing spirit and their relentless devotion. I think it is a sick religion, and an even sicker civilisation, making thousands of sacrifices every year for no other reason than blood-thirst.

Well, I knew the meaning of the butterfly's wings, and it did not feel like a lot of progress. I turned off the computer, checked my log recovery - which still displayed a four-hour wait - and went into the kitchen to prepare lunch. As I was picking some coriander from the fridge, a glint from the window caught my eye. I put down the stalks I'd been holding and raised the curtains.

An aircar waited underneath my building: a slick, red limo with tinted windows, conveniently masking the view of its driver and passengers.

There was an itch between my shoulder-blades: a familiar sign of danger. A sign, too, that I was onto something.

All I had to do was find out what.

I gobbled up my steamed rice and eggs, trying not to focus on the aircar, and came back before my desk to find He Zhen's computer blinking. My recovery of the log history was complete.

I stared at the screen, at the last few lines of the log. It had been He

Zhen who had connected last, a few hours after midnight eight days ago, a remote session launched from an unknown router address.

Could it have been someone else? I thought for a while, but decided against it. If someone else had had He Zhen's login, password and fingerprints, they wouldn't have bothered with changing the session system.

I tracked the router address, which turned out to be a network centre not far from the Gardens of Felicity. What had He Zhen been doing? Erasing things from her computer?

I stared at the timestamp, and saw that the connection had been broken after thirty seconds. Far too short to log in and erase multiple files, unless He Zhen had set up some kind of script. But I knew she hadn't been planning to run away, so there was no reason for her to have done so.

My phone was beeping – an incoming call that I had not seen for several minutes.

"Yes?" I asked, pressing the button to light up the screen.

It was Wen Yi, now dressed in purple silk with serpentine animals embroidered on the sleeves. The animals looked very close to Chinese dragons, but not close enough to give offence; in Xuya, as in China, the only people entitled to the dragon were members of the Imperial Family.

"Mr Brooks? I wanted to check on your progress." He was speaking English, though he knew I could speak perfect Xuyan. By this he subtly relegated me to a rank of inferior, the worst kind of immigrant, the one who could not fit into Xuyan society.

"You *are* checking," I said, curtly. "Is that red aircar yours?"

He laughed. "You Americans!"

It was a deliberate insult, and it smarted. But I would not give in to anger, that would only reinforce his low opinion of me. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Tell me how things are going."

"I do not think I can do that," I said. "My client –"

"I am not a man you can dismiss that easily, Mr Brooks."

"I do not doubt that. Still, my progress is my own."

Wen Yi said, "I am told you are working hard. That is a good thing, Mr Brooks. But you should not forget, when you do succeed in your search, who is paying you in the end."

An unmistakable reference: he was He Zhen's future husband, and almost part of the family, with the engagement finalised. "If I succeed," I said.

"You will," Wen Yi said, raising a long-nailed finger, lazily, as if admiring a dagger. "You have...drive, Mr Brooks. Take care not to lose that, or there will be...consequences."

"I see," I said. "Consequences." He was telling me that no matter what happened, I had to continue the search for He Zhen. Which, in turn, meant that she was still alive.

I had no time to focus on the consequences of that, because I needed all my wits about me. A conversation with a Xuyan, especially a powerful one, always felt like navigating between pits of acid.

"Do not think yourself overly safe, Mr Brooks. There are many paths a man can take."

Another, subtler threat: I would not protect He Zhen if I abandoned the investigation. He would merely find someone else to duplicate the little I'd done.

"I see," I said, again. I did not want to provoke him further.

Wen Yi was still staring at me. "A pity. You are a smart man. And yet you refuse to fit in among us. Even your Xuyan friend was unable to impress the bases of our society on you."

I wanted to tell him he had no right to bring my lover Mei-Lin into the conversation, no right to sully her memory. But that would

have been folly. So I simply shook my head.

"There could be a bright future, among us."

I couldn't give him a satisfying answer.

Wen Yi said, "It is not for nothing that we dominate North America. It is not for nothing that our motherland China has triumphed over the Whites in Asia."

"I know your worth," I said, slowly. "I do not doubt your might. But my ways are my own. There is little for me in Xuya." And I realised, as I said those words, that they were true, that nothing tied me to that dingy office in Fenliu, beyond the memory of Mei-Lin, and the knowledge I could go nowhere else.

It was not the best of times for such a sobering thought.

Wen Yi's face remained impassive. But his eyes took on a darker glaze, and his voice, when he spoke again, was clipped and precise. "Very well. I had thought you more capable of grasping the opportunities at hand, Mr Brooks. No matter. Do what you are paid to do. It will be enough."

And he cut off the communication.

So. I had learnt several things, most of which were unpleasant. Mei-Lin had advised me to leave the White Lotus alone, once, in what seemed like another lifetime. I knew that in that, as in so many things, she had been right.

The only thing I could focus on was Wen Yi's admission that he was looking for He Zhen. Ergo, that He Zhen was still alive, laying



low for fear of the White Lotus –

No. If I'd been her, if I'd gone to that meeting and been wounded, and known that if I came home my mother would simply hand me over to my future husband, I wouldn't have remained in Fenliu. I'd have gone to a place where the White Lotus had no reach.

Greater Mexico, or the United States.

Given what I already knew, it had to be Greater Mexico.

But she had to get past the border. It wasn't that easy, especially to get into Greater Mexico, which had all but closed its borders. The entry requirements were stiff for the border towns, and got stiffer the further south you went. To settle permanently into the capital at Tenochtitlan for a non-Mexican was near impossible, unless you had serious leverage. You needed outside help.

I knew a couple of people who specialised in passing foreigners into Greater Mexico. They were easy to find if one insisted badly enough. They were also easy with their promises; most foreigners they ferried across the border ended up indentured in some brothel in Cuauhpamoc or Itzohuacan, or in the silver mines, breathing dust until they choked on it.

I plucked the picture of He Zhen from the table and went out, back to the Gardens of Felicity, and the network centre she'd connected from eight nights ago.

Then I moved in ever-widening circles, questioning those human smugglers I could find, showing them He Zhen's picture. I got only blank looks. The thirtieth or so I tried, though, shrugged, and said, "You'll want Doc Smith for that. He always gets the strays."

Doc Smith was American-Irish by birth, judging by the impressive mop of red hair. I found him in a sordid bar in the Fragrant Hermitage district, the poor White neighbourhood. He was nursing a cup of rice alcohol between quivering hands. When I showed him the picture, he stared at it with rheumy eyes. "No," he said. "Never seen her."

He was lying. He'd looked at the picture for far too long. "She'd have come here eight days ago," I said. "Possibly wounded. She'd have been desperate to get across the border."

"What's it to you?" he asked.

"Her family wants her."

"Some family," he snorted. "Let the dead dogs sleep, boy. We'll both feel better for it."

"Wish I could, Doc. But I have a job to do."

"Sounds like a crappy job if you ask me."

Yes, a crappy job. Tracker for the White Lotus, because there was no other choice if I wanted to save He Zhen, if I wanted to save my skin. I focused on the task at hand. "Is your job better? False promises to clients?"

He shook his head. "I've never cheated a client before. Don't intend to start now. I gave her what she wanted."

"And what was that?"

He smiled. "Safety. And I won't tell you more, boy. Old Doc is no fool."

"I'm not with them."

"That's what they allow you to think," he said, with a slow, sure smile. "Trust me, boy. Give it up and go home."

I stared at my hands for a while, thinking of He Zhen, of the lie that had been her life – years spent dreaming of another place, only to find out marriage would be no refuge. "I can't," I said. "She's not

My progress was slow. The Mexica took their immigration very seriously

safe where you sent her. She won't ever be safe."

"So you're meddling? It's an unhealthy occupation."

I spread my hands on the table, thinking back to Mei-Lin, of our brief months of happiness in Xuya before death had taken her. "I have nothing else left," I said. Doc smiled. He slid his mug of rice alcohol towards me, but I refused it. "I'm not here for oblivion. I'm here for answers."

"I can see that." He stared at me, and it occurred to me that the rheumy eyes saw far more than they let on. "It's no place for tender hearts, Xuya. No wonder they all want to get out."

"Give me her address," I said. "Or I'll call the militia here."

"That's an empty threat, and you know it as well as I do. No Chinaman is going to enter this area."

"If I could track her here," I said, "someone else will. Someone else will come, and they'll tear her address out of you. Don't you think she ought to be warned at least?"

He cocked his head like an owl studying its prey before swooping. "I'll give you a contact address," he said. "That's all. You're on your own after that."

"Thanks."

His hand closed over my wrist. "I'm trusting you. I trust that you have a heart and a brain. Don't you disappoint me."

I could no longer make any promises.

The address Doc gave me was a temporary electronic mailing folder, where I left a concise message to He Zhen, appealing to her family sense. I also left something else: a spy program that would monitor the connections to the server. And then I waited.

It took two days, during which Wen Yi called at least three times. I never answered.

I got a mail in return, unsigned. *Let matters rest.* I erased it, for what I was most interested in was where the mail had originated.

As I suspected, it came from Greater Mexica. More specifically, from a network centre in the inner suburbs of Tenochtitlan. Damn. It looked like I was going to have to pull a few strings of my own.

I went back to the Fragrant Hermitage, into one of the seedy bars, and paid for forged travel documents – a fake e-visa that attested to my being a faithful practitioner of the Mexica religion. The visa mentioned that I was entitled to travel to Tenochtitlan, for a pilgrimage at the Great Temple.

After checking the visa carefully, to make sure I had not been cheated, I spent the next few days reading about the Mexica gods and the sacrifices, preparing myself for embarrassing questions at the border. Then I made the rest of my travel preparations, and within two days was on the way south in a rented aircar, being followed at a distance by two red airmos.

Greater Mexica was not a beautiful country. The North was a desert dotted with casinos and brothels. As you moved south, the land gave way to marshes, and to the electronics plants that brought in most of Greater Mexica's wealth.

My progress was slow. The Mexica took their immigration very seriously. In each town I was stopped for my papers by two or three officials in feather regalia. I hoped the red aircars behind me would be stopped too, but knew better than to rely on such a thing.

It was a prosperous country, in spite of the aridity: in every hotel were brand-new computers with butterfly symbols, and hotspots where you could access the network for no extra charge. I could almost feel the communications saturating the optic fibres beneath my feet.

On the fifth day, I reached the outskirts of Tenochtitlan, and joined the queue of vehicles being checked at immigration. I spent the fifth night in my car, slowly inching forward towards the lights of the big city.

The immigration officials spent some time with me, but not overmuch. They injected nano-trackers into my blood to be sure I would indeed be leaving Greater Mexica at the end of my 'holidays'.

For a foreigner, it is forbidden to sleep in the heart of Tenochtitlan. I found myself a hotel in the suburb of Tzopalli, some twenty miles from the centre, and used the network connection to leave a message on He Zhen's electronic inbox.

In the morning, I went to the network centre, found myself a nearby bar, and settled before a mug of hot cocoa. I still had my spy program in the inbox, set to send me a mail as soon as someone accessed it.

Nobody fitting He Zhen's description came, but my spy sent me a mail all the same. I looked into the network centre and found only a small child of ten or so years, wearing the square steel collar of slaves. A messenger, then.

I followed the child through the alleys and canals of Tenochtitlan, and lost him when he hopped onto a black barge that sped away from me. A barge with a cactus-and-eagle insignia. The emblem of the family of the Revered Speaker, the Emperor of Greater Mexica.

Damn.

I asked a few discreet questions, and ascertained that this particular boat was the property of one Yaotl-tzin, a minor member of the imperial family who lived on an island some ten miles south of Tenochtitlan. I also got rumours about that house, definitely on the unsavoury side: of virgins brought from Greater Mexica or from abroad, to serve as fodder for private orgies.

With a growing hollow in my stomach, I recalled Doc Smith's words to me: *I gave her what she wanted. Safety.* If that was safety, he had a very sick sense of humour.

Rather dispiritedly, I asked for an interview with Yaotl-tzin – the Honourable Yaotl – under the pretext of writing a memoir. I wasn't expecting much, but Yaotl-tzin acceded to my request.

On the day of the meeting, the black barge came to pick me up on the quays of Tenochtitlan. It was manned by a dozen slaves, sturdy men who busied themselves with the controls and ignored all my attempts at starting conversation.

As the shores of the city receded I wondered, not for the first time, if I was making a mistake. No one would go looking for me if I vanished now. I'd been carrying He Zhen's pendant ever since entering Greater Mexico; I could not help fingering it from time to time, looking for reassurance.

Yaotl-tzin's house was a huge villa by the shores of the lake: a maze of patios and arcades decorated with Mexica frescoes. I followed my escort through several courtyards with pine trees, through corridors with wall-screens displaying the history of Greater Mexico, from the short-lived war with Hernan Cortes and his conquistadores – a war Chinese gunpowder and cannons had soon ended – to modern times, the Tripartite Wars and Mexica dominion on silicon chips and high-grade electronics.

I was shown into a living room with glass cases displaying old codices. Near the window was an ebony desk of Xuyan facture, loaded with papers and ephemeral chips, and a wicker chair where I seated myself, not sure of what else I could do.

I waited. Invisible loudspeakers broadcast Mexica hymns, with flutes and drums giving an odd resonance to each verse.

When the curtain of the door was lifted to a tinkle of bells, I rose, ready to confront Yaotl-tzin with my feeble excuses.

But it wasn't Yaotl. It was a woman dressed in the fashion of the Mexica, with an elaborate blouse and matching skirt, decorated with patterns of running deer and parrots. Her hair fell to her shoulders, Mexica-style; her skin was the yellow of corn, so prized by Mexica that young girls would lather themselves with makeup. I knew it to be no dye.

For, unmistakably, the woman confronting me was Xuyan. "You are a stubborn man, Mr Brooks," she said, in accented English.

I bowed in the Xuyan fashion, with both hands slid into the folds of my sleeves. "Mistress He Zhen," I said.

She shook her head. "No more. Here I am known as Tlazoxochitl, Precious Flower."

"It suits you," I said, without irony. She looked Mexica – the quiet, sure way in which she moved was more Mexica than Xuyan, as if she had indeed blossomed there.

"Why did you come here?" she asked.

"Why did you?"

She shrugged. "You know why. I had no choice. I will not marry a man like him."

"And that was your solution?" I asked. "To be some whore in a stylish brothel?" I realised I was being unfair, but I felt used, knowing all I had done in finding her was bringing the White Lotus here.

She smiled in a slow, secret way that reminded me of the effigies of Buddha in the temples. "I am no whore. I am mistress of this house."

"That was how Doc Smith got you past the border?" I asked.

"Of course, Mr Brooks. It is the fashion of the court, to have Xuyan wives who are pretty and know how to hold themselves in society. Yaotl needed a paper wife he could display at family parties. He thought I was perfect."

"Perfect," I said, slowly, staring at her.

She smiled. "You forget family does not always include ties of

blood and flesh. Tell me why you came here."

"You know. Your mother hired me."

Her face darkened. "Yes. But you are no fool. You know the real reason. And still you came."

"You are in danger here," I said. "Wen Yi is looking for you. I need the proof you brought to your meeting with him."

She crossed her arms over her chest – one of them still moved awkwardly, and I guessed she had not completely healed from those gunshots. "Why?"

"Because I need to expose him."

"I could have exposed him at any time," He Zhen said. "I chose to come here instead. I am safe. I do not need you, Mr Brooks, or anyone else. This is a fortress safer than anything my mother could devise." She had moved towards the window. I followed her, and saw in the courtyard Xuyans being dragged to their knees by burly Mexica. As I watched, the Mexica raised automatics, and methodically shot the Xuyans in the head. "The White Lotus has no reach here, and never will have," He Zhen said.

"No," I said, at last, feeling my stomach roil at the casual violence. He Zhen's face was still emotionless. "Tell me, was it worth the price, He Zhen? Was your safety worth that price? Tell me if you're happy."

She smiled again, but there was bitterness in her expression. "Am I happy, moving from one arranged marriage to another? I do not know, Mr Brooks. Here I wield what power I can in the house. Here



I am not sold like a piece of flesh to save the family fortune. What would you have done in my place?"

"I don't know," I said. "But if I had been your father, I wouldn't have let you be so bitter so young."

"But you are not my father. How fortunate," He Zhen moved between the glass cases, laying her hands over the beautiful codices. "You learn, you know. Living in my mother's house, you learn very fast."

"It can't have been so bad," I protested, moved to defend He Chan-Li through some obscure instinct.

She smiled again. "You know nothing. You are a lucky man, Mr Brooks."

"I know that your fiancé tried to kill you. Do you find running away such an easy solution?"

Her face darkened again. "I am no coward."

"Then prove it."

"By coming back like a bird to the slaughter? I am no fool."

I sighed. "No, you are no fool. And yet what did you think you'd achieve, that night?"

She shrugged. "Foolish things. You are right. I thought I could break a marriage contract by myself. Life taught me otherwise."

"I can still get the man who shot you," I thought back to the picture of He Zhen her mother had given me, of the radiant, innocent smile, and knew that nothing I did would bring that back.

He Zhen looked at me with dead, emotionless eyes. "Why should I help you? You came here to save your skin."

"I came for you," I said, knowing it to be a lie.

"I have no need of you."

"You've already said it."

"That does not make it any less true," she said. "Go away."

"No," I said. "I will not leave without proof."

"Go away. Find yourself a hiding place, Mr Brooks. Somewhere the

White Lotus hasn't touched. They still exist." Her smile was ironic.

Once, ten years before, I had run away. I had crossed the border in the middle of the night with Mei-Lin by my side, going forth into the darkness with no idea of what I would find.

The world had shrunk since then. Mei-Lin had died, and I had traced my own path, to stand here, in the heart of the Mexica Empire, facing a girl who was no longer young. "I will not run away," I said, gritting my teeth. "I will see justice brought."

"Then you are brave," He Zhen said. "Foolish, as well, for all your words."

Perhaps she was right. But I could not walk away. I had not come all this way for nothing. I had one last thing left, one last toss of the coin to convince her. "You may not care about what Wen Yi did to you, but others do."

"My mother?" He Zhen laughed – a sick, disabused laughter.

"You have a grandmother," I said, and saw her flinch.

But still she faced me, unmoving. "I had," she said. "Here it doesn't matter any more."

I reached inside my pocket for the one thing I'd taken all the way from Fenliu to Tenochtitlan: the jade pendant He Lai had given me, the one she'd said was He Zhen's favourite. Gently, I laid it on one of the glass cases, and saw He Zhen's gaze turn sharply towards it. "Your grandmother thought I should return this to you," I said. "She hoped I would not have to bring it back to her."

The Mexica raised automatics, and methodically shot the Xuyans in the head

He Zhen said nothing. Her gaze had turned inwards, as remote as that of a statue.

"What should I tell her?" I asked, softly.

"It doesn't matter," He Zhen repeated, with much less conviction. For the first time emotion had come into her voice. She stared at the pendant for a while, biting her lip.

Then, slowly, agonisingly slowly, she reached out, snapped her hands shut around it. Her face still had no expression.

I did not speak, simply watched her wrestle with herself.

She said, at last, "Very well. You are a hard man to refuse, Mr Brooks. My servants will give you what you need. Do what you want with it. And then leave."

"Thank you," I said.

I walked back to the door in silence, leaving her standing before the open window, silhouetted in light. Beneath her, in the courtyard, lay the corpses of the White Lotus's agents.

When I lifted the curtain to exit the room, I heard her call me. "Mr Brooks?"

I did not turn around.

"I am not happy," she said, very quietly. "But don't tell her that. Tell her that I did the best I could, with the little I had. And that it will have to be enough. After all, isn't it the same for everyone?" And for the first time I heard a sixteen-year-old, bewildered girl, wondering if she had done the right thing.

I said nothing. In truth, I had no answer, and she must have known it. I walked away without looking back.

Before I left Greater Mexico, I went back to my hotel, and used my connection to tinker with things. I forwarded the proof He Zhen had given me to the tribunal of Fenliu. I would have liked to send it in my own name, even to face Wen Yi myself and tell him who had delivered the final blow, but I knew this was foolishness. If I did

this, there would be no safe haven for me in Fenliu, nor anywhere in Xuya. The White Lotus always avenged its own.

So, to cover my tracks, I manipulated the router addresses until it looked as if He Zhen herself had sent the incriminating evidence.

It was the most satisfying thing I had done in a while.

As I drove back to Xuya, I followed the development of events with interest; although I wasn't in Fenliu, images of Wen Yi's arrest made the news even in Greater Mexico. The newscasters were betting on a strangling at the very least. Xuya did not joke with corruption of government officials.

In Fenliu, I dropped off the car at the rental agency, and took the maglev to He Chan-Li's house.

She met me at the door, still dressed in her business suit. Behind her was her mother He Lai, in the same traditional costume she'd worn when I'd first come to the house. "Mr Brooks. You come at a difficult time," He Chan-Li said.

"I know." Leiming Tech's value had plummeted on the market, and the banks were withdrawing out of it, fast. "I came to tell you your daughter is well, but that she won't come home."

He Chan-Li's face did not move, but I could feel the hatred emanating from her. "She never did know what family was."

"No," I said. "Aren't you glad that she's alive?" But I already knew the answer to that. I knew why He Zhen had felt so oppressed in that house. He Chan-Li turned away from me, and walked back towards her house.

I was left with He Lai, who was quietly staring at me.

"I am glad," she said, softly, as I pressed into her hands the other thing He Zhen had given me: a small pendant in the shape of the red lotus, the Xuyan symbol for filial devotion.

I asked, at last, "You were the one who erased the files on He Zhen's computer, weren't you? That's why she had to change the session from private to open, because otherwise the computer would have asked you for fingerprints."

He Lai said, not looking at me, "She is my only granddaughter. What else was I to do? Sometimes our paths take us far away from what seems truth, but they are still the ones the gods ordained for us." There were tears in her eyes now, and she was making no effort to hide them.

"I know," I said at last. "I'm sorry."

"Thank you. I'll see to it that you are paid."

"This isn't about money," I protested.

"Most things are," He Lai said. "You will be glad for it, trust me. Goodbye, Mr Brooks. I trust we will not meet again."

No. I did not think we would.

I rode the maglev back to my flat, staring at the patch of sky I could see between the skyscrapers. At this hour of the night, I was one of the only passengers. I listened to the familiar whine of the train, like a symphony welcoming me home. I would go back to my flat, rise in the morning and go again through the routine of my life, filling the days and nights as I had done since Mei-Lin's death. I wondered whether this was worth it, or whether I did it because I had no other choice. I wondered if it mattered, and thought back to He Zhen's words.

I did the best I could, with the little I had. And it will have to be enough.

Yes. It would have to be enough, day after day, night after night.

It would have to be. ❧

Aliette lives in Paris. She works as a Computer Engineer but moonlights as a writer of speculative fiction. This is her second story in *Interzone*, after 'Deer Flight' in issue 211. Visit aliettebodard.com for more about her work.



Stephen King's **Riding the Bullet** (2004) is directed by Mick Garris, who seems to be the adapter of choice for King nowadays. It's 1969, and Halloween hitchhiker Alan (Jonathan Jackson) struggles to get home and visit his widowed mother in hospital. On the road trip down memory lane he meets a sinister old codger, violent rednecks, and a ghost psycho driving the car from *Christine* (1983). Stars like Barbara Hershey, Cliff Robertson and David Arquette do what they can with this tiredly conventional material but cannot save a plainly dull film. Intended as a surreal night ride through whimsical answers to childhood fears with melancholic responses to tragedies solved by folksy homilies, this is moribund when it needs to be macabre, serving only cheap, cheesy scares in the approved EC horror comix manner. Frissons that were parodied in *Creepshow* (1982) are dishonestly recycled as if brand new. Compared to recently unleashed weirdness by David Lynch, this is unimaginative and flimsy drama fuelled by comforting revelations about second chances in life, overly familiar genre in-jokes, and simplistic metaphors for juvenile anxieties (the title's Bullet is a roller-coaster).

An effective vanguard for Jon Favreau's live-action *Iron Man*, due in 2008, Marvel's animated feature **The Invincible Iron Man** (2007) is reasonably faithful to the superhero character's 1963 origin story on several key points. However, it's updated to China not Vietnam, the villains include a secret mystic cabal instead of a guerrilla warlord, and the chief menaces are elemental beings and the ancient Mandarin's evil spirit instead of conventional military troops. As voiced by Marc Worden (who also played Iron Man in both *Ultimate Avengers* animated movies), injured industrialist Tony Stark invents a hi-tech suit of armour to escape from captivity but later returns to China, hoping to fulfil an eastern Iron Knight prophecy, defeat his sworn enemies and rescue

the cursed heroine Li Mei (Gwendoline Yeo). Partly inspired by Howard Hughes, billionaire inventor playboy Stark was Marvel's answer to Bruce Wayne, as neither possesses actual super-powers. But whereas Batman's principally a detective, Iron Man typically solves problems with advanced defensive technology and is closer to the scientist as protagonist ideal of SF than most comicbook hero types. A notable divergence from *Iron Man* comics' lore is that Stark's father Howard is still alive (in the comics, Tony was orphaned by a car crash), able to lend some degree of paternal influence despite being troubled by his own failures. It's a surprising departure from the usual childhood loner story, establishing a Stark dynasty and setting up different character dynamics than expected.

David Fairman's curio **Messages** (2007) is a British serial-killer mystery centred on a supernatural-thriller aspect, but its main cast: Jeff Fahey, Martin Cove (the 'himbo' from *Cagney & Lacey*), Bruce Payne, and Kim Thomson (remember the glamorous redhead from *Virtual Murder?*) all seem to be playing in different TV movie modes – from slasher horror and cowboy cop-show, to weirdo mannered hospital drama and bittersweet romance. There are some brief yet highly effective moments of gore, too many night-terror hauntings perhaps triggered by copious single malt whiskeys, and a confusion of female victims (including Eileen Daly) whose naked and eyeless bodies are dumped in Hertfordshire countryside. The film's casual unfolding of scare opera routines boasts all the sedentary pacing of low-key detective shows like *Morse* and *Bergerac*. The obligatory twist ending is not easily anticipated but, in retrospect, its effectiveness is barely average for this genre and, partly due to a regrettably stilted performance from Norman Bates wannabe, Father Randall (Jon-Paul Gates, from Fairman's *Cold Fish*), it's laughable when deployed by producer-director Fairman. Clearly, they ought to have made psycho-capable Fahey (*Maniacs*, *Body Parts*), or plausible madman Payne (*Passenger 57*), the villain here.



LASER FODDER TONY LEE

From enterprising low-budget writer-director Brett Piper, maker of garishly camp anthology flick *Shock-O-Rama*, comes **Bacterium** (2006), about secret military biotech research accidentally creating a monster. The body-melting virus afflicts a renegade scientist, whose basement hideout in an old house is discovered by nosy paintball players. Military goons surround the place hoping to control the situation, but safely bunkered officials cannot agree on how to neutralise a potential menace to the world. Nuke it with a quantum singularity, or not? Brazenly over ambitious films can be tremendous fun, and subgenre literate filmmaker Piper knows how to shape allusive material for maximum 'remake' appeal to fanboy viewers. *The Quatermass Xperiment* and *The Blob*, filtered through Troma sensibilities, this weirdly gruesome, likeable schlock has strong but sexy female characters, hysterically funny techno-geek dialogue from loony boffins, hapless politicians (with names like Senator Quagmire!), and a creatively edited blend of physical and traditional miniature effects works that never fails to amuse or disgust. If you enjoy movies where gangs of gun-toting bikers come to rescue the heroes from governmental oppressors, catastrophic scenarios are discussed by inoffensively bad actors in darkened rooms, and plenty of icky stuff goes on at regular intervals, this one's for you.

The self-explanatory **Flight Of The Living Dead: Outbreak On A Plane** (2007) takes half its runtime to really get started, making it feel like an episodic TV spoof stretched beyond its limits. However, when the infected zombies finally break free of the cargo hold, squirming through crawlspaces aboard the Pentagon-targeted 747 stuck between storm fronts over Canada, the hyper sadistic picnic becomes almost relentless. All the usual *Airport* or *Airplane* stereotypes are hastily dismembered in enjoyably gory set pieces. Obnoxious oversexed teens get what they deserve. Watch out for a starving undead Asian strap-trapped in his business-class seat, the guilty biotech scientist refusing to accept responsibility for the air crisis, the golf pro with a beheading putter and, shamelessly best of all, beware of the legless nun. As directed by Scott Thomas, the main cast all play it straight, often seeming bland in contrast to salivating and energetic mobs of flesh-rippers, but this works in the shocker's favour. Basically, it's *The Return Of The Living Dead* (1985), crossed with *Snakes On A Plane* (2006), and such blackly comic horror-action hybrids have rarely been this amusing.



The greatest TV series of all time, **The Prisoner**, celebrates its 40th anniversary this year with a digitally re-mastered edition of the DVD boxset. Having recently visited Portmeirion, the picturesque coastal resort in Wales used for location shooting, my perspective on Patrick McGeehan's genre brainchild has changed, but only insofar as a brief stay in – and successful escape from – the 'village fantastique' has increased my critical appreciation of the timelessly original show. While this century's Bourne and Bauer provoke controversy as heroic icons revealing everything that's wrong with the west's paranoiac and divisive socio-political spectrum, the dramatic impetus granted this series by struggling freedom fighter Number Six is more powerfully relevant now than ever. Shattering the standard formula of home entertainment with its innovative techniques and overlapping metaphors, developing surreal platforms for intriguing SF adventures, breaking the constraints of studio bound conformity and censorial acceptability, and challenging viewers to always question whatever they see or hear, became astonishingly routine for McGeehan, and his production team, such that *The Prisoner* has since been elevated by fandom into the ultimate cult TV show.

Animation of a very different style and content to *The Invincible Iron Man* is now available on disc in **Gandahar** (1988), about the conquest and thousand-year occupation of an imperfect paradise; and **Les Maîtres du temps** (aka: *The Time Masters*, 1982), during which a starship crew attempts to save a boy stranded alone on an inhospitable planet. Directed by the late René Laloux, still best known for *The Fantastic Planet* (aka: *La Planète sauvage*, 1973), these French sci-fi adventures embrace a mysterious sensuality, in contrast to much Japanese animation. Here, there's less focus on hardware or the visceral impact of monster violence, and aliens exhibit a strange beauty like Cronenberg's mutations, Clive Barker's deformed creatures, or J.K. Potter's bizarre photo-art. First in designs by Jean 'Moebius' Giraud, and then Philippe Caza, these consistently amazing films have fascinating otherworldly landscapes that transcend mere quirkiness, expressing the world-building affect of SF in more deliberate fashion than most similarly themed live-action productions. Evocations of traditional space opera are readily apparent in telepathic gnomes, comet rides, temporal paradoxes, superhuman minds, symbiotic relationships, orphaned characters, and FTL communications. Instead of nitty-gritty politicking, Laloux delivers considered appraisals of perversely utopian idealism, and so the faceless angels on Gamma 10 achieve unity by abolishing difference, while the nurturing matriarchal society of Gandahar flees the Nazi-like onslaught of seemingly destructive robot-men. Maintaining, from start to finish, a defiantly enigmatic tone – both memorably visual and weirdly aural, Laloux's challengingly ambivalent, vaguely schizophrenic SF, effectively critiques the fairytale simplicities of *Star Wars*, cultural imperialism and moral preaching of *Star Trek*, and comfort zone anthropomorphism of Disney. Despite momentary lapses into those grindingly unimaginative areas, and the (inconspicuous?) absence of high-speed action scenes, Laloux's craftsmanship of persuasive SF-fantasy scenarios populated with grotesques and glamour is certain to delight a whole new generation. Both DVDs from Eureka include 36-page booklets of critical notes by Craig Keller, and interviews with the films' artists. **Tony Lee**



Christopher Barzak • Bantam, 320pp, \$12 pb

Randall Silvis • Omnidawn, 160pp, \$12.95 pb

Paul Leppin • Twisted Spoon, 189pp, £10 pb



In a Town Called



Mundomuerto

Randall Silvis



There is something about growing up which seems to fascinate many of us who may have done so. This seems odd. Novels which focus on the process – as both Christopher Barzak's quite brilliant *One for Sorrow* and Randall Silvis's seeping morose *In a Town Called Mundomuerto* both do in differing ways – tend to focus on the helpless-helpless churning of your imprisoned soul generated when you first experienced hormone GBH (remember? wow!), the blaring wilderness of the cruel world that draws blood when you scrape your self against its prison bars, the badlands that bar escape, the deep unresolvable *belatedness* of the inner self you must finally leave behind, on the cutting room floor, eternally feculent from the fall of Being Born. (Barzak, a technically proficient young American writer, necessarily goes in as well for a gingerly oleaginous redemption scene at the end, in which he gathers his astonishingly dysfunctional family around something theoretically resembling a 'hearth', but maybe being American is a belatedness or homiletic he'll grow out of; Silvis though American is less young, and the main strength of his tale lies in its refusal of any reemption whatsoever.) A Martian might find nothing fascinating in this stuff except for the fact that it can be found fascinating.

So YA novels marketed ostensibly for adults can't exist for the sheer pleasure of the thing. Most adults are happy not to be reminded of their prison days, nor to recollect too vividly that our inner child awaits the slightest hint of dementia, that the moment we stop turning tricks we're arrested. And the few adults who claim to have really enjoyed their adolescence tend to emit a sweetness that kind of sucks,

an imago-like pretense that they actively welcome being haunted from within; that the caul-encumbered inner child, which had somehow failed to pass the baton, was somehow still their *friend*. In any case, they are not ideal readers of the typical YA novel, which is mainly about learning how to escape being YA.

One for Sorrow is YA in the same sense as J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* – Barzak's main epigraph is from that book, and his text is laced with homaging semi-quotes and echoes throughout – is YA: in its attempt (almost successful) to render the first-person narrative of a fifteen year old boy as though he were a person – a tabula rasa the reader puts on with the first sentence and sees the story through – not a fifteen year old boy gnarled by hormones and very bad luck in his actual real life and haunted by a posthumous-fantasy like assemblage of the dead, all of whom are transfigured, as in any Posthumous Fantasy, by transpentine longings. (In this case, this aspiration to pass over from limbo is enacted quite literally: once their claws have been extracted from the world they have died in bondage to, they literally cross a railroad bridge to Somewhere Else.) *One for Sorrow* is a novel about how it feels for a human being to grow out of bondage; unlike its great model, though it is a close call for young Adam McCormick, it is a success story.

Adam begins where he must, at school, in a small-town Ohio desolated by global capitalism, with a boy he loves: "There was this kid I used to know who always sat in class with his head propped up in one hand." The kid, Jamie, has already been murdered as the tale begins (the murderer is never found: Barzak knows precisely how *not* to resolve a plot, which makes the hearth-

scene at the end seem all the more tacked on), and has begun to haunt Adam. They lie together: Adam gives him succour: which is to say he gives him sex. It is one of the great strengths of *One for Sorrow* that it depicts its adolescent protagonists as absolutely untroubled by sexual guilt or hangups, maybe in part because the tale is free of any religious concerns whatsoever; Adam's sexual melding with Jamie, and the warmly explicit scenes in which he and young Gracie engage in heterosexual fucking, are so openly written that the reader is actually able to focus, without prurience, on these experiences. It is a rare absence of cant and miasma, reminiscent perhaps of a similar lack of cant in Elizabeth Hand's *Black Light* (1999) and *Illyria* (2007). When – in the free space he has thus reserved for himself and his characters – Barzak ends his tale without 'resolving' the 'question' (which the text never asks) of Adam's sexual 'orientation', there is an almost palpable release from prison: Barzak's, Adam's, yours, mine.

But there is much for Adam to free himself from. The crippling of his mother, by a drunk driver who ensconces herself bloodsucker-like in the family home, in order to take care of her victim – the murder of Jamie – the seriously uninteresting (which is to say American) dysfunctional relationship between Adam and his father – all this and much more encumber young Adam like an unkindness of cauls. We gradually learn how deeply damaged he is, partly through his almost supernatural inarticulacy, except when he is telling us his tale (from a point some way into the future perhaps); and we gain a sense that the knotted anguish of the yet-unreleased dead, who surround him, and who need to word their fate as badly as he does, is almost exactly isomorphic with his own imprisonment. (But this is a tale of fantastika: nothing is metaphorical for anything else: what is written is what is told:

SCORES JOHN CLUTE

period.) Again and again, Adam is trapped by the ghosts, whose hunger to be storied out of bondage is deftly conveyed:

And then there they were, clambering through the brush, pushing aside branches until they were on both sides of Sugar Creek, stretching their arms out toward me. One said in a voice like someone who's just awoken from a nightmare, "Say something. Say anything," and held his trembling hands out as if he was waiting for me to give him something to eat.

And whenever Jamie begins to thin, he burns his own memories to keep himself warm: death in this novel being a race between amnesia and the tale that lets you pass.

The penultimate paragraph of the novel – it begins "Right then I thought, *You can live again*." – should not be read. I have done so, one reader is enough. The rest of the book, despite a few obeisances to Workshop Twee, breathes the mountain air of escape. Adults may read *One for Sorrow* and remember the mountain air.

It would have been a very great pleasure to have liked Randall Silvis's **In a Town Called Mundomuerto** as much as its heart is good; but this did not happen. The problem may be length: it is a short novel, but much

too long for the vignette recounted, with late-Hemingway sententiousness, to a young boy by an old man who, decades earlier as a young boy himself (a parallel which is stapled frequently into the telling), had participated in a romantic tragedy. The setting is a Latin American fishing village. Young Lucia Luna has breasts like moons and everyone can smell her virgin sex, and she sings like wow in the evenings, accompanied on the guitar by the narrator. Tragically, a dolphin-man, a guy in a porkpie hat, arrives in the village and seduces her, arouses the superstitiousness and spite of the villagers, and things go from bad to worse. She is pregnant. She asks the boy – who is intoxicated by the smell of her and by her almost full moons, though nipples never do quite, I think, manifest – to go to the neighbouring town and bring back the porkpie hat guy; but he fails.

A long day passes before the tale is told. The village, which was once known as Mundosuave, turns into the village known as Mundomuerto. The jungle, which was once impenetrable, is disappearing into the end of the twentieth century. The last sentence of the tale expresses, with some

urgency, a longing inflected by the Anglo Magic Realism of the author: "As for the boy, until he grows beyond it he is content to be sustained on hard work and wonder, and on the hope that this world of ours is not truly what it seems."

A short note: Paul Leppin (1878–1945) was a German-speaking Czech writer – there are none left in 2007 – who depicted Prague between 1900 and 1930 as a Theatre of Memory whose inner screed was Decadence: ash and fog and fatal sex (he died of syphilis, long after the Nazis had tortured and Disappeared him). His Prague and Kafka's are each other's inner child: each other's belatedness. His last novel, **Blaugast**, was never published during his lifetime; and only now appears in English from the elegant Twisted Spoon Press. Blaugast's astonishingly violent decline, from bourgeois life into the most savagely depicted human degradation I can remember encountering in fiction, is so couched that everything he experiences must be understood literally: even Prague itself. Here is the rag and bone shop of true urban fantasy. It is not a great novel; but it is our story, lest we forget. **John Clute**

Terry Pratchett • Doubleday, 349pp, £18.99 hb

At first glance, recent Discworld books divide into those with clear-cut plots featuring multifaceted characters like the city guard or the Lancre witches, and those tackling complicated real-world issues with a new, straightforward cast. But as Granny Weatherwax knows, a second look can show things in a different light. As in *Thud*, straightforward plots have hidden depths. So do recent arrivals in Ankh Morpork.

Consequently, the reappearance of former conman Moist Von Lipwig is a delight. In *Going Postal* he revitalised the moribund Royal Mail because it was take the job or be hanged. Surely success means Lord Vetinari has nothing on him now? But his shrewd lordship sees Moist struggling with boredom. Before he succumbs to hobbies like Extreme Sneezing, the city is far better served by introducing him to Mrs Topsy Lavish, aged owner of the Royal Bank and its associated Mint. When she bequeaths Moist her little dog, and thus, the entire banking operation, he faces a whole new set of challenges.

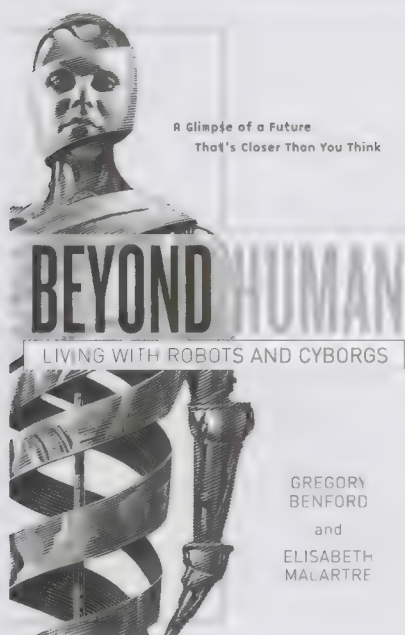
His talents for making mischief and profit in the financial sector are not appreciated by the unnervingly humourless, Mr Bent who, as Chief Cashier arrives before dawn and works till nightfall. The rest of the Lavish family are outraged, notably the selfish and snobbish Cosmo and Pucci. Moist doesn't like snobs; his earlier life fleecing the common man depended on understanding folk who keep their money in socks under their mattress. Now he's their champion. Besides, he and Lord Vetinari both take a dim view of anyone threatening an innocent dog. But Moist doesn't just have new enemies. An old acquaintance arrives ready to show the world Moist's feet of clay for the right price. With his fiancée, Adora Belle Dearheart, occupied with ancient golem concerns, Moist has to think fast and move quicker to avoid catastrophe.

Published in a month when queues threaten calamity for real-world banks, one might imagine Terry Pratchett has been channelling the precognitive Mrs Cake. She makes an appearance, as do old friends like CMOT Dibbler. Self-indulgent? Not really. They're ideal characters to feature in episodes key to developing plot and setting. Similarly, readers shouldn't be distracted if a villain with a mutilated hand, an undead

Published in a month when queues threaten calamity for real-world banks, one might imagine Terry Pratchett has been channelling the precognitive Mrs Cake. She makes an appearance...

wizard and massed ranks of golems strike faint echoes of recollection. The logic of their inclusion is sound as sub-plots draw threads from the entire Discworld tapestry, ultimately woven into the highly-charged and dramatic conclusion.

Going Postal reduced free enterprise's pitfalls and predators to simplicity through the absurdities of the Discworld. *Making Money* clarifies the fundamentals of economics in a bank where modelling liquidity involves glass tubes going gloop. Along the way, Pratchett's exploration of the morality of capitalism should be applauded. His writing remains seemingly, deceptively, effortless. Don't be fooled. With a light, precise touch for characterisation and mastery of unobtrusive plot-construction, his instinct for comedy and timing is second to none. Once readers have revelled in the laughs, they should take a moment to really appreciate the skill underpinning this fine entertainment. **Juliet E. McKenna**



Forge, 260pp, \$24.95 pb

Speculation is the life's blood of science fiction. Most of us will, by now, have read scores of stories and novels exploring the possibilities of space travel, imagining the architecture of futuristic cities and hypothesizing the physiology and behaviour of alien races. However, arguably the most celebrated stalwart of the sci-fi feature is the robot. What effect will it have on the life of man? How will it evolve? What forms will it take and functions will it carry out? In *Beyond Human*, Benford and Malartre address these questions and more.

The book begins by delving into the topic of cyborgs. While film and fiction has given us *RoboCop* and space adapted astronauts with nuclear fuel cells instead of lungs, the authors espouse a more prosaic vision. They envisage developments in the field of hearing aids, retinal implants and prosthetic limbs. So don't hold your breath for implantable chips that will help you to work out your finances at the beginning of the month. On the plus side, you'll be glad to discover that those of us who wear eyeglasses are technically considered cyborgs!

Because it takes a realistic perspective, the book inevitably deflates many of our treasured expectations. Accordingly, the robots described in the second part take the form of anonymous household appliances rather than chromium androids bent on bringing humanity to its knees. Old debates, such as whether machines can reach a state of 'selfhood' and whether machine intelligence will outstrip human intelligence are presented in a fresh,

comprehensive manner that breathes new life into the subject.

The style is discursive, mildly humorous and gently provocative. The majority of theories put forward in the book are backed by meticulous research, interviews with leading figures in the relevant fields, and of course, by the illustrious Benford name. Nevertheless, this is a work of speculation, as opposed to a scholarly piece, so the authors have thankfully allowed themselves the license to make some giant leaps and grandiose claims.

Much of the book's success lies in the fact that the subject matter is examined with reference to relevant sf literature. Thus, on the future of transformed humans, we find references to Pohl's *Man Plus*, while on the idea of the pseudo human robot we have everything from the Tin Man to *AI's* Gigolo Joe. This adds greatly to the accessibility and appeal of the book, making it a pleasurable read for fans of the genre.

For those even moderately up to date with popular science literature, *Beyond Human* offers little by way of factual revelation. Having said that, writers should find inspiration for any number of stories, and those who like to debate or privately ponder will find plenty to absorb their attention. The moral of the book is that the issue lies in regulating and controlling our own behaviour in relation to these technologies rather than in the evolution of the technologies themselves. Be warned! If you meet me over the next few weeks, that's what I'll be talking about. **Peter Loftus**

Lucius Shepard • PS Publishing, 500pp, £25 hb

A poet of the unpalatable and the profound, Lucius Shepard returns with a remarkable new collection of nine stories and a 'Story Notes' section at the back which is interesting enough in its own right to qualify as a tenth tale. Indeed, it would seem that a delineation of some of Shepard's earlier life is a staple first ingredient of any review of the man's work or interview with the author. So be it.

Early traveller, war correspondent, bouncer, boxer, paperwork processor, rock 'n' roller, and an award-winning writer whose beautifully intricate sentences and tales, whose understanding of human nature (his male-female relationships are astonishing), and whose pungent, moody and eloquent prose makes one call to mind a philosopher swerving between the intellectual and the muscular: like Rousseau bench-pressing one-twenty at the gym.

In 'Stars Seen Through Stones' we have a cautionary tale set in the rock 'n' roll business, and relationship failures on many levels – not to mention one of my favourite descriptions in the whole book: "I had seen him, thinking himself unwatched, slumped on the couch, clicking the remote...mired in the quicksand of depression...a crummy king forsaken by his court, desperate for admirers." Imagine a solo like that on most of the pages and we might begin to comprehend the power of Shepard's writing. Another favourite is from 'Dinner at Baldassar's': "He was decisive as an ax."

'Liar's House' is an enjoyable story based on the dragon myth of Griaule, while leadership squabbles and secrets surface in the aforementioned 'Dinner...'. But it's the male-female relationships to which I referred earlier that I will end with, where dialogue is used to show the inadequacies of human communication – which shows the gap between the stunning prose that Shepard uses and the sheer force of things that sometimes cannot be said between two partners: "Everyday, there'll be two or three times when I see you, like just now, when I look up and see you, and it's like a blow...a physical blow that leaves me all ga-ga. I want to drop everything..." "I don't mind having [this conversation] again, but we're not going to resolve anything. We'll never figure it out."

It's quite a feast, this book, and vigorously recommended. **David Mathew**



Tor, 320pp, \$24.95 hb

Humanity's destiny amongst the stars was once to build vast empires across that final frontier, relying on just bravery, ingenuity and the occasional thermonuclear device. Nowadays, such blatantly anthropocentric attitudes are clearly untenable; so instead our imaginers throw humanity into starscapes already colonised by more technologically advanced species, where

humanity's goal is just to find their niche within political, economic and technological hierarchies that have possibly already been in place for millennia.

So it is with Tobias S. Buckell's novel *Ragamuffin*, set in a cosmos where numerous races, including humanity, live under the control of the self-termed Benevolent Satrapy – an ancient, seldom seen race which uses enforcer species and humanity's own trade organisations to help keep a lid on our unbridled technological advancement. The Satrapy's ultimate sanction against rebellious worlds is isolation; the 48 planets under their control are linked together by a subway system of wormholes – there's even a diagram at the front of the book just to underline the subway analogy – and there are few societies willing to risk being cut off from the network. Although, as the novel soon begins to explain, it's when something starts opening the wormholes again that you really have to worry.

The focus of the novel, certainly to begin with, is the super-cool Nashara; in some ways a typical modern sf hero – a hard-bitten, technologically augmented fighting machine with built-in secret IT weapon. But she is a she, and she is black, which is certainly less common. But with almost half of the book focusing on Nashara and her escape from an increasingly complex set of plots and conspiracies, it does come as

something of a narrative surprise when the book shifts for a whole quarter of its length to an entirely different set of characters and events on the recently 'reconnected' human colony of New Anegada – called Nanagada by its Caribbean-descended inhabitants. Here there is an ongoing struggle between two human cultures; the easy-going Afro-Caribbeans, holding on where possible to both scientific rationality and technology, and the cruel-hearted Azteca with their predilection for appeasing alien gods with human sacrifices. This is possibly where the book runs closest to the wind in terms of suspension of disbelief; it is also where it comes clean on being a sequel of sorts to Buckell's debut *Crystal Rain*, which was set entirely on Nanagada.

However, Buckell's authorial voice is sufficiently brisk to keep you reading a narrative that rattles along at a fair pace (thanks in part to its use of snappy three to six page chapters), and some of the characters' Caribbean roots give an interestingly different tone to the dialogue. Most importantly, for all its hints of a third book yet to come, *Ragamuffin* has a genuine focus on consequences – people, whole planets and humanity's place within the cosmos change irreversibly between chapters 1 and 71, and through the characters the reader is left well aware that the results will not necessarily be for the better. **Paul F. Cockburn**

Charles Stross • Tor, 336pp, \$24.95 hb

After one of most extended overnight successes in the business, it now doesn't seem a week goes by without another new novel by Charles Stross – or one that isn't in a different genre. As far as I know, Stross hasn't yet turned his hand to full-blown Mills & Boon style romance. But *The Merchant Princes* series, of which this is the fourth volume, is probably the closest of his works to the other literary meaning of that term, and fulfils all the criteria of action-filled and outrageously plotted adventure romp, with a resourceful and independent-minded heroine in Miriam Beckstein, ex-business journalist and (it transpires) long lost orphaned heiress of a clan of world-walking drug smugglers in a semi-feudal alternate world.

What started out as a seemingly simple parallel world fantasy has become, by

this fourth volume, something quite other: a increasingly complex melange of Spraguean science-fantasy, with elements of political-conspiracy and procedural thriller, plus frequent digressions on trade, economics, political systems and military-industrial espionage and hardware. New readers, at least to this series, are best advised to go back and start at *The Family Trade*; Stross's sketchy (and, it has to be said, rather clunking) backfills are more an *aide mémoire* for previous readers than any coherent explanation of The Story So Far.

At the end of *The Clan Corporate*, Miriam's unwilling marriage to the brain damaged Prince Creon (The Idiot) was interrupted when the pretender to the throne, Egon (aka The Pervert, though never to his face) gatecrashed the party, set fire to the palace, killed half the ruling family and declared the trader families outlaw. Miriam barely escapes the massacre by world-walking to New Britain, though hardly to safety.

Meanwhile, one of the clan's defectors

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to our world has set the FBI off on a panic chase for a nuke hidden in downtown Boston, and a three-sided shooting war breaks out between opposing groups on at least two worlds. And somewhere around the middle of *The Merchants' War*, a group of Duke Angbard's bright Harvard-educated researchers discover not only a fourth world (one that appears to have been devastated in a far future war) but that there are potentially infinite other worlds out there.

The already convoluted plot gets more complex still, and ends yet again on another delicately poised cliff-hanger. I'm intrigued to know where this will go next, but frankly, at this point, it could go almost anywhere. **Steve Jeffery**

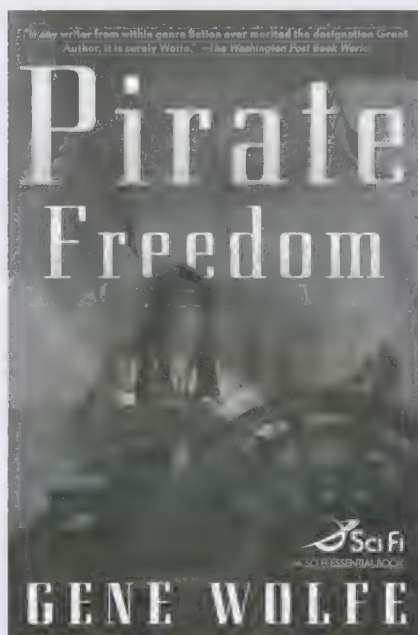
Gene Wolfe • Tor, 320pp, \$24.95 hb

The first thing you do when reading a book by Gene Wolfe is take note of who is telling the story. Remember, Wolfe's narrators, even the omniscient third person, are rarely truth tellers, though they are always presented as if we could have no alternative but to trust them. Because Severian remembers everything, it does not mean that he *tells* everything. So, in *Pirate Freedom* we are in the hands of Father Chris, a Catholic priest in contemporary America who is confessing to murder, theft and sex. Now what could be more honest than that? Except that as the book goes on we have more and more reason to feel uncertain about what we are being told.

Let's start with the character's name: Father Chris or, in another life, Captain Chris. We never learn his full name, except that he tells us that others find it difficult to pronounce. Yet there is not this difficulty with any of the other characters, who come from a host of cultures, including English, Spanish, French, Carib, Amerindian and African. What's more, when we are, just once, given a phonetic pronunciation of his name, it comes out as something other than Chris.

So our guide through this swashbuckling tale is a mystery, and what actually happens is a mystery too. Chris frequently resorts to elisions of various sorts: "and so on," he says regularly, or even, more blatantly, "if I told you everything that happened it would take more time than I have." The story is littered with gaps that we are left to fill as best we can.

Even the most fundamental part of the story is missing. We start at some point in the near future when Cuba is no longer communist. Chris's father is a New Jersey casino operator (and, we presume, gangster) who goes to Havana to open a new casino, and puts the young Chris in a Catholic school attached to a monastery. Then something outside the monastery changes – we never know what or why or how – and when Chris, as a young man, chooses to go out into the world, he finds himself in the middle of the 17th century. For want of anything better to do, he becomes a seaman, then his ship is taken by pirates, and suddenly he becomes a pirate captain himself. (Remember, another common element in Wolfe's books is that his characters rarely take a position, rather



they are imagined into them by the other characters – think *Operation Ares* and *The Book of the New Sun* and *Free Live Free* and, well, you get the picture – so Chris is seen by his fellows as a pirate captain, and so becomes one.) Naturally, he proves to be a superb seaman, a brilliant tactician, a great pirate.

From here on, the novel is filled with all the colour and action of an old romantic pirate story. Women disguise themselves as men in order to become sailors and follow their love; there are castaways and sea battles and chases and buried treasure with secret maps. It's nothing like the stories, Chris tells us, as he provides some gritty everyday detail, but in its broad sweep this is exactly like all the stories. And though he never gives details – "and so on" – Chris is clearly the archetypal romantic hero, since every woman he meets is in love with him, and he wins every hand to hand fight. Then something happens, Chris is swept through time once more, into a twenty-first century earlier than the time he left. And there he becomes a priest in modern America, but with one eye on the situation in Cuba, so that when Castro falls he might go back and somehow be reunited with the woman he left in the 17th century.

This is, to all appearances, a stand-alone novel, but there are enough gaps and hesitations that I wouldn't be at all surprised if a companion volume appeared at some time. If you want a riproaring pirate adventure, this is for you, but read it carefully – because there is a lot more going unsaid within this book. **Paul Kincaid**

Chasing the exclusive that will make his name, Edwin Norris is plunged into the grotesque world of a centuries-old, city-sized penitentiary.



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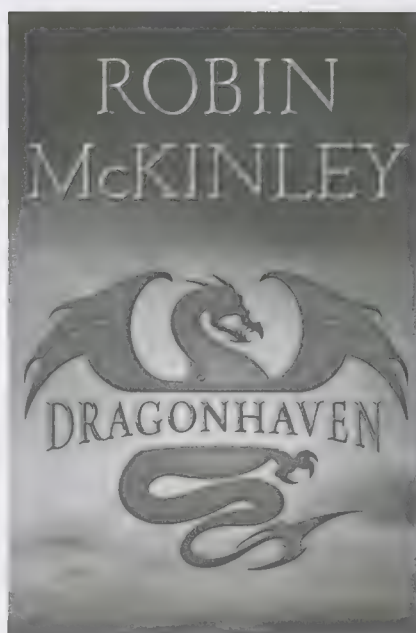
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ISBN 978-1-84753-830-7

Robin McKinley • Putnam, 333pp, \$17.99 hb

Robin McKinley's *Dragonhaven* is set in a contemporary America that is almost, but not quite, like our own. In this world, dragons are real but dangerously close to extinction. The last remaining members of the species live in carefully-secured preserves, the largest of which is Smokehill National Park. The discovery of a human poacher inside Smokehill, dead beside the dragon he shot, sparks a media frenzy that threatens the survival of the park. But unknown to the poacher's bloodthirsty parents, the dead dragon left something behind: her baby. In the fractured American politics of dragon conservation, it is illegal for any human to interfere by saving and raising that baby. But fourteen-year-old Jake Mendoza, who has already lost his own mother, cannot let the baby dragon die.

Dragonhaven is told from Jake's perspective, in the circular, elliptical mode that he uses to write down the story, years later. The first thirty-two pages are enough to stretch any reader's patience; consisting almost entirely of exposition



about Smokehill itself, they make a less than gripping read. However, readers who make it through that slow opening will be rewarded by the sheer emotional power of the events that follow. Jake is forced into a messy, painful self-transformation that rings absolutely true, as he is forced to give

up his own independent life to become a newborn dragon's mother.

The pacing of *Dragonhaven* is deliberately slow, sometimes maddeningly so, and McKinley purposefully elides expected moments of tension. For instance, when Jake worries, early in the book, that the poacher's parents will win and Smokehill will be disbanded, the older Jake immediately adds, 'Smokehill is still around, and everyone [...] would say that it's in massively better shape' (94). At moments like that, it becomes clear that the point of the book is not the external plot. What matters – and what is perfectly, magically conveyed – is the development of Jake's relationship with the dragons. It is a book about the relationship of humans to other species, and about grief and healing. The dragons themselves feel utterly real, and the halting beginnings of communication between human and dragon are transcendent.

Readers who come to this book expecting a fast-paced, traditional fantasy plot will be disappointed. Written in the style of a literary novel, *Dragonhaven* is a beautiful, infuriating, messy miracle of a book, equally accessible to teenagers and adults. I can't wait to re-read it. **Stephanie Burgess**

Karl Schroeder • Tor, 336pp, \$25.95 hb

At the close of the first volume of Karl Schroeder's Virga sequence, the devious aristocrat Venera Fanning was left tumbling through the air toward certain death in the fires of Candescence, the central sun and light source of the artificial world that gives the series its name. *Queen of Candescence* is her story; the story of what happens next.

What happens is that she escapes her doom by chance. We meet her again as she is plucked from her comatose Newtonian trajectory by an ageing dandy of Spyre – a vast, ancient and decaying piece of macroengineering, a rotating tubular habitat that sustains upon its inner surface a complex civilisation declining into insular decadence. Just the sort of place, in fact, that Venera Fanning is suited to.

Though not the sort of place she might have chosen to end up; her only wish is to return to Slipstream, her home, to find out whether her Admiral husband still lives. But escaping from Spyre will be no easy

task, despite her possession of the plot McGuffin, the key to Candescence. Spyre is busily conspiring with physics to destroy itself, and its population of feuding families and micronations are too busy maintaining their fragile political détente to address the wider issue of their very world fragmenting beneath their feet.

Queen Of Candescence differs from the swashbuckling boy's-own adventure of its predecessor. While set in the same world, following the manipulative Ms Fanning makes for a more 'feminine' plot; driven less by physical action than by intrigue and politics. Fanning is a believable and surprisingly sympathetic flawed heroine. She is a vicious court politician to the core thanks to her cruel upbringing, but as the book progresses we see her learning that other people's feelings aren't just pieces on a chess-board – although her iron will and determination are tempered by this knowledge rather than broken.

But it wouldn't be a Schroeder novel without a stunning setting, and Spyre is just that – an intricate and fully realised steampunk world-within-a-world. And it's not just worldbuilding for worldbuilding's

It wouldn't be a Schroeder novel without a stunning setting, and Spyre is just that – an intricate and fully realised steampunk world-within-a-world. And it's not just worldbuilding for worldbuilding's sake

sake, not the fruitless march of Harrison's clomping foot; the structure of Spyre informs its politics, and the politics drive the plot while the structure throws obstacles in the paths of the characters. Spyre also allows Schroeder to slip in some subtle allegorical comments on the insular narrow-mindedness of another more familiar world that is threatening to fall apart beneath the neglect and blinkered greed of its inhabitants.

Most of all, it's fun. Schroeder balances the 'hard' gosh-wow setting with a human plot that keeps moving the pages, and while he may not be one of sf's great prose stylists, he writes more than well enough to capture the imagination of any but the most jaded reader. *Queen of Candescence* is a fine second instalment to what promises to be a memorable series. **Paul Raven**

A multitude of imaginable



Andy Hedgecock talks to Gary Gibson about faith, power, transformation

After a desultory rummage through several bookshelves, a recent visitor to our home asked whether the books on secularism and rationality belonged to me. When I told her they were indeed mine, she jumped to the conclusion the titles concerning religion and mythology must belong to my partner. When I told her, no, these too were mine, her comment was “Talk about hedging your bets.”

It was a salutary reminder of the common and enduring idea that a commitment to rationality precludes openness to mythic modes of understanding the human experience, and disallows recognition of the human desire for transcendence.

The Glasgow-based writer Gary Gibson refuses to be cowed by preconceived notions about the compatibility of concerns, ideas and themes. He has produced three novels to date: *Angel Stations* (2004), *Against Gravity* (2005) and, just published at the time of writing, *Stealing Light*. His slickly paced and gritty space opera plots are crammed with technological invention – nanotech based on the interface of organic brain and machine, faster-than-light travel,

interstellar trade, rogue AIs and the impact of advanced alien intelligence on human development.

The graphic, cinematic sweep of Gibson's books has, inevitably, led to comparisons with the works of Richard Morgan, Peter Hamilton and Neal Asher. Reliable points of reference, but beneath Gibson's obvious relish for scientific speculation is a strand of writing concerned with the continuities in the human condition; a strand that explores the nature of humanity and highlights our attempts to understand the world through myth and storytelling.

“What's interesting to me is that human nature is the one great constant in life, regardless of unceasing technological and cultural change. We're still driven by the same desires and emotions that we have been for many millennia. Part of that nature seems to be a deep need for transcendence: the desire to believe there's some grand plan of existence, some hidden purpose to creation.”

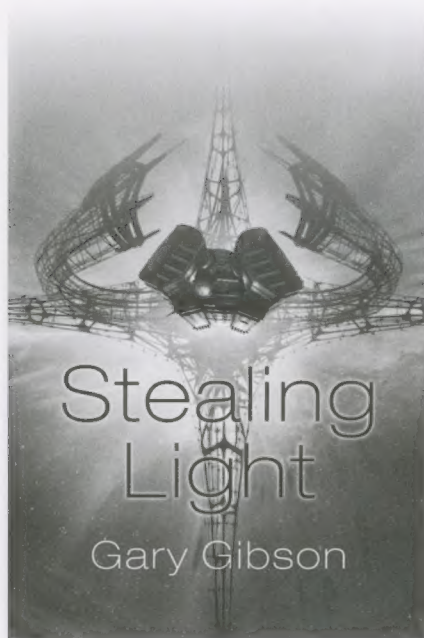
All the books acknowledge this deep need, but *Angel Stations* and *Stealing Light* also deal with the enduring and pernicious power of organised religion and its ability

to compete for influence, even against the most voracious corporate interests and even in the most advanced technological societies. I ask Gibson what draws him to this theme.

“Appealing to spirits and gods gives those who believe in them a sense of control over their lives, and that's where organised religion comes in – they represent the people who claim to have the answers. It's that need for answers that pretty much guarantees that if our descendants are anything like us, our history will continue to be a war between rationalism and superstition.

“What's surprising is how often sf has been seen as a predictor of a kind of super-rationalist utopia where everyone abandons religion and superstition in favour of some vaguely imagined society free of the pettier human drives. Yet some of the best sf around has used the same transformative appeal found in religion. I'd cite *Dune*, Greg Bear's *Blood Music*, 2001, *Childhood's End* and the whole Vingean Singularity idea to this end – and all of these influence the stuff I write. That's not by any means to suggest these approaches

futures



and Co-codamol

are religious, but it's fair to say they all involve asking roughly similar questions about the universe and our place in it, but provide wildly divergent answers and approaches to those questions.

"I say all this despite being a very atheistic person who has a lot of trouble accepting why anyone would be religious in the modern world. I agree with the thesis that it's often really more a way of identifying yourself as a member of a particular community or group: a way, perhaps, for the disaffected and disenfranchised to gain a sense of kinship and belonging, the same need for a sense of purpose that drives some to send money to evangelists or worship statues."

Sudden transformative change

Having identified seemingly contradictory impulses underpinning much of the best sf, Gibson goes on to point out that a worldview grounded simultaneously in religious faith and scientific optimism may be less paradoxical than is at first apparent.

"The ideas in these books are, perhaps, not entirely unlike certain aspects of religious belief that focus on some

imagined future time when the just will be rewarded and the world made new. Sf has often been about embracing radically transformative events, where mainstream writing has often focused on *preventing* such implied threats to the existing status quo. I'm not the first to point this out, and I won't be the last. So to focus on religion, and its inevitable influence on the future worlds I think up, isn't really so surprising since I think it's an inevitable part of any imaginable future social environment."

Gibson's take on the philosophical conservatism of traditional literary is similar to that of the cultural commentator Tzvetan Todorov, who feels a key function of fantasy is the expression of cultural desire and disenchantment. It's possible, of course, to think of mainstream literary fiction that tackles themes of social, political, psychological and spiritual transformation – John Cowper Powys' *Weymouth Sands* and Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities* spring to mind – but there are few writers who address these issues head-on and with the wit and intensity of the best sf.

Not that Gibson sees sf readers and writers as having a privileged insight into the balance of rationality and transcendence, nor does he feel they are immune from the odd bout of irrationality, but he does feel the genre opens up the possibility of an essentially optimistic and progressive world view.

"With our desire for fiction that often features sudden transformative change, whether through the Singularity, or contact with aliens, or the desire to vicariously reinvent ourselves through post apocalyptic scenarios, readers of sf are by no means invulnerable to the same desires that drive the rest of humanity. Obviously we tend to express them in quite different ways. And, as much as I believe in the absolute necessity for scientific rationalism, I can't help remembering some of the most brilliant people can sometimes also be the most irrational – witness Newton and his alchemy. However, it must be said that rather than having an interest in the transformative power of gods and spirits, I like to think the majority of people who

read my stuff are more focused on the rather more authentically transformative power of technology, both now and in the future. It's where our destiny lies, but it won't be without a fight, and that's a good source of conflict for story ideas."

Like many sf writers of his generation – and several earlier generations, come to that – Gary Gibson was drawn to fantastic fiction by a Robert Heinlein story.

"There was a library with a copy of *Have Spacesuit Will Travel* waiting for me on a bookshelf. I can't remember how old I was, but I was pretty young. I read it and I was a goner from that moment."

Having already acknowledged an enthusiasm for work by Frank Herbert, Greg Bear, Arthur C. Clarke and Vernor Vinge, I ask Gibson which writers from outside the sf genre have influenced or excited him.

"I think a lot of sf and genre writers are fans of Hunter S. Thompson, because of the insane energy in his writing. It's a real shame he's gone. The world *needs* Hunter in Baghdad, in the Green Zone. He certainly excited me, but I don't know if he influenced me, except in the sense I wished I could write more like him, with that manic energy. Beyond that, I don't know if I can really cite 'influences'; it's more like a weird osmotic absorption of ideas and concepts floating around in my head I've filched from everything from the last book I read, to *New Scientist* or *Fortean Times*, or wherever."

Explore and populate the unknown

Gibson's latest novel *Stealing Light* has a multilayered plot and pace to burn. Set in the 25th Century, it concerns the colliding stories of former military pilot Dakota Merrick and a secretive alien race, the Shoal. Dakota is a 'machine head' with a brain rewired to allow access to a sprawling neural network encompassing intelligences artificial and organic; and the Shoal have a monopoly on faster-than-light travel and, therefore, a virtual stranglehold on intergalactic commerce. Rich in compelling and idiosyncratic characters, complex plotting and an infectious delight in baroque and dizzying technologies, it's a

classic slice of Space Opera.

"Space Operas appeal primarily because they provide the widest possible canvas for storytelling and the means to create the same sense of widescreen spectacle that first made the form popular several decades ago. They're a future mythology and embody the very human desire to explore and populate the unknown with our imagination. Once you take humanity off this one tiny ball of rock and mud, the possibilities are enormous. You can do that in a very plot-driven way – should you choose – without compromising the themes of your story. That can make it very, very satisfying to write. Besides, it appears stunningly obvious to me that humanity has some kind of long-term future in space in the coming centuries, and the fundamental appeal of stories of 'What Might Be Out There' will continue to find an audience for a very, very long time."

If the writer and scholar Karen Armstrong is correct in her assertion that myths are all about "making a painful rite of passage from...one state of mind to another...[bringing] fresh insight to our lost and damaged world" then what are the

there are people out there crazy and willing enough to build their own ships to get into near-orbit, then further, and they're almost certainly driven by a sense of their own potential mythology. In other words, we're in a present with a multitude of imaginable futures, and it's in our nature to tell stories about them. The more we know about extrasolar planets, the more we'll be able to imagine what might or might not be there. That means enormous mythopoeic potential for writers."

I was flying

Stealing Light represents a shift of gear for Gibson. It's both more polished and more intense than his earlier work, a fact that seems to have as much to do with the context in which it was written as Gibson's growing confidence and skill as a writer. Gibson injured his back last year and had to give up his day-job, in which he works as a graphic designer, for several months. Housebound, and suffering from considerable lumbar pain, he immersed himself in his third book to an extent that hadn't been possible with its predecessors.

"I wrote *Stealing Light* under a certain

"At the beginning of this period, I stopped *Stealing Light* for about a month, in order to radically redraft and lengthen the synopsis to three or four times its original size. I thought 25,000 words was a lot, but I've been told there are many writers out there with longer synopses to work from. It was at this point I understood why some writers lock themselves into isolated cabins for weeks or months at a time to finish a book; it's almost like entering an altered state of mind when you're that focused. "It has to be said I was pretty much out of my head on very strong painkillers and various other prescription drugs during the writing process and I sometimes wonder if they had an influence, enough so I briefly considered putting together an acknowledgements page thanking the makers of Co-codamol, Ibuprofen and others for their influence on the story. I was flying."

Since we've entered the murky waters of the writing process, I ask Gibson if his future mythologies are shaped by research, or whether his stories emerge from thought experiments, with the detailed research

"The space race isn't over. In fact, it's barely even begun"

fundamental uncertainties driving Gary Gibson's future mythology?

"The idea of monopoly, basically; which is another word for power. Power is about controlling resources, whether informational or physical, and the current Middle-East situation is clearly about controlling resources. The natural response to monopoly – whether over oil or an imagined FTL drive – is to break it if there's an advantage to be had in doing so.

"We've got private individuals and companies launching people into low-orbit and planning moon missions. At the same time, devices like Hubble are constantly expanding our knowledge of nearby stars, and now there's a search for extrasolar planets capable of supporting life. It's simply impossible for a species like ours – with its inherent obsession with mythologising its own history – not to tell stories that give us a grasp on the inherent possibilities of such developments.

"The space race isn't over. In fact, it's barely even begun, apart from a very brief, politically-forced glitch from the late Fifties to early Seventies. I don't want to sound too flag-waving about it all, but the fact is

degree of duress but, if anything, it's proved to me how important it is to be able to concentrate on a book without having to deal with a day job – if at all possible. Having all that time to write helped me when it came to putting the book together and to get deep into its guts. I started thinking of how many artists prepare for a painting with preliminary sketches, alternative version of a work, and realised it was okay to draft, redraft and re-imagine.

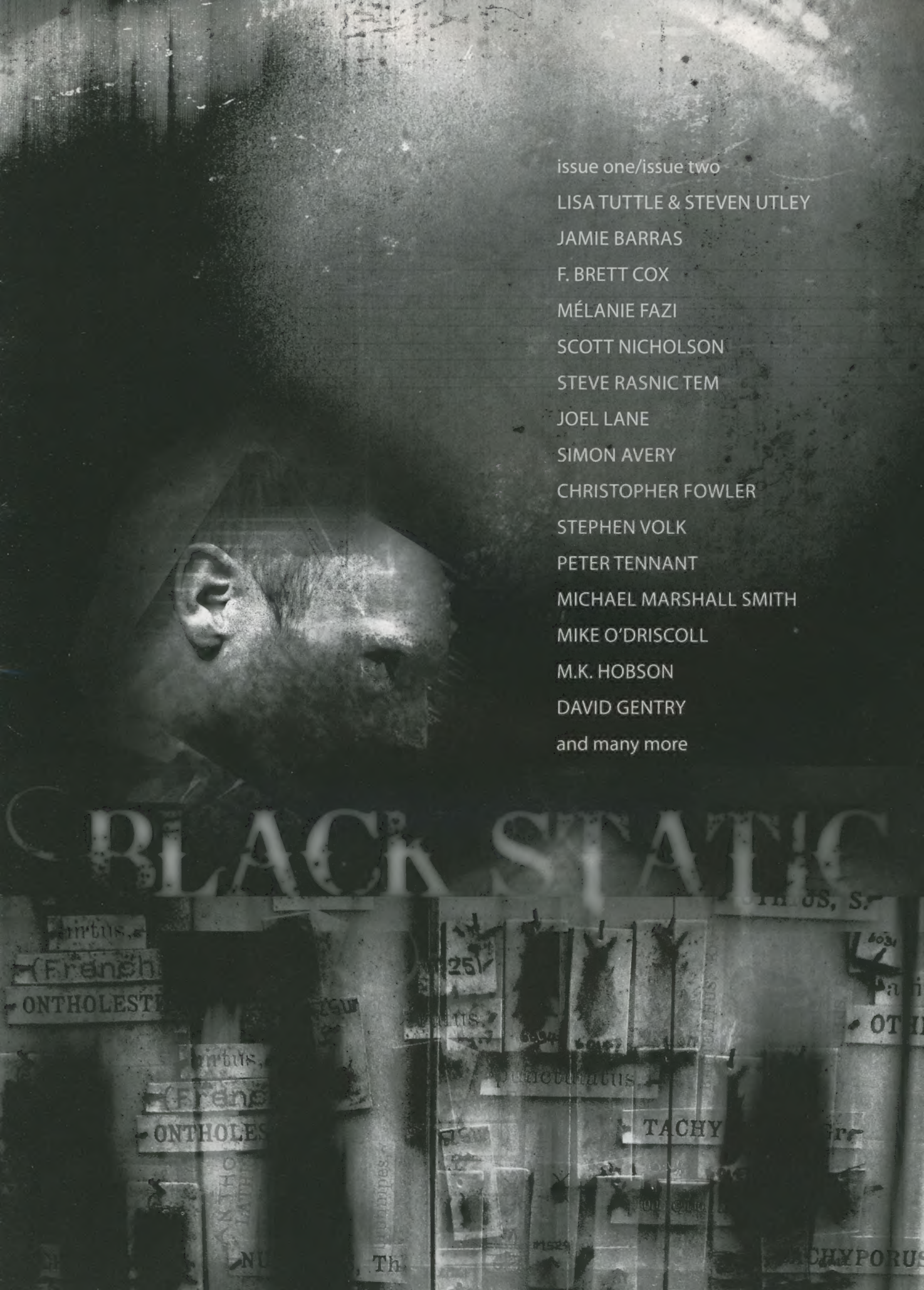
"I read M. Simpson's biography of Douglas Adams a while back, where the author describes how Adams began his writing career sleeping on borrowed couches. He was effectively homeless despite early sporadic sales prior to the runaway success of *Hitchhikers*, while friends who were initially as ambitious to be successful writers did the 'sensible thing' and got decent day jobs in order to support themselves: they were never heard of again. This came very much to the fore of my thoughts when I was housebound, and unable to distract myself from the writing process: I realised just how much of a difference it makes to be focused solely on that process via my very direct experience.

filling out the narrative framework.

"An article about how the dinosaurs might have been wiped out by gamma ray bursters was the seed, certainly, for *Angel Stations*. Although there's a certain degree of imagined science, I do at least try and develop a real-world rationale for some things. I think it's more that there's a couple of hundred vague ideas floating in my head for years, then I read an article or see some piece of information on the net or in the papers, and suddenly something clicks: an idea and a piece of data come together in an 'aha' moment. I read part of Frank Tipler's *Physics of Immortality* for *Against Gravity*, and Guantanamo Bay was very much in the news at the time, and both had an influence on that.

"I think it depends on the kind of story you're telling: *Stealing Light*, on the other hand, didn't involve a huge amount of research – outside of fact-checking on the Magellanic Clouds, and some interesting articles I dug up on certain stellar phenomena I can't talk about without giving too much of the story away."

Stealing Light is out now from Tor (441pp, £16.99 hb)



issue one/issue two

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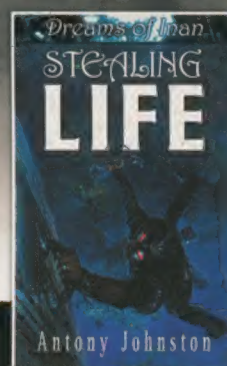
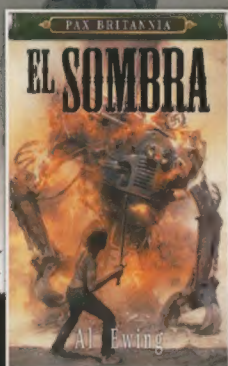
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